

Superb cuisine, excellent service worth long drive over Malahat

Pam Grant

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AMUSE BISTRO

Address: 753 Shawnigan-Mill Bay Road, Shawnigan Lake

Tel: 250-743-3667

Reservations strongly recommended.

Open: Wednesday to Sunday evenings from 5 p.m.

Major credit cards and Interac accepted. Wheelchair accessible.

Rating 5

Bradford Boisvert and Leah Bellerive opened the doors to Amuse Bistro in the summer of 2006 and have been gaining fans ever since. Vicki and I crossed the Malahat to this tiny restaurant set in what used to be a private home to discover why.

Unsure of where to enter when we arrived, we followed a couple through the sliding glass doors at the rear of the building to find ourselves in a large room with an open kitchen. After a warm greeting, we were led upstairs into the living room, now seating up to 20 people in a space marked by casual elegance.

We discussed a small but well-considered drinks list with Bellerive. I began with a refreshingly different drink crafted from grapefruit juice, Alizé passion fruit liqueur and champagne. Designated driver Vicki -- one of the most

discerning coffee drinkers I know -- was equally impressed with the contents of her cafetière, as we sampled gratis rustic white bread, paired with a white bean spread flavoured with poppy seeds, whole grain mustard and preserved lemon.

We were offered two menus -- a three-, four- or five-course table d'hôte (\$36 - \$58, with wine pairings \$59 - \$99) and the à la carte menu crafted for winter 2008, both of which illustrate Boisvert's respect for local ingredients and French cuisine. We were impressed by the level of knowledge that our server Nikki displayed with both and, though it was no easy choice, Vicki opted for three courses from the former menu, while I decided to explore the latter.

After we ordered, Nikki returned with the evening's amuse bouche -- a tender mussel with lardons of lean bacon and a little apple, served on a little bed of baby oak leaf lettuces. Like my aperitif, this did its job in awakening the palate. An amuse bouche is a good indication of the level of quality and skill to follow, something I concluded after I once had a particularly vile interpretation elsewhere.

Vicki continued with roasted squash bisque, devoid of the ubiquitous Indian spices but simply flavoured and garnished with a swirl of buerre noisette. She noted it was delicate but offered depth of flavours, a term that was also a perfect description of my caramelized onion soup, made with a rich veal stock and paired with a slice of puff pastry and Gruyère tart.

After the soup, we were treated to yet another surprise -- an intermezzo course of pear sorbet, enhanced with white wine and a touch of saffron.

Palates refreshed, we moved on to main courses. Vicki summed up her choice of pan seared medallions of farm-raised pork tenderloin with caramelized apples and pan juices finished with organic black currants as "beautiful."

My entree, tender lamb sirloin with sauce paloise was simply perfect. Vegetables were treated with equal regard. Boisvert and Bellerive have harvested purple heritage carrots, rainbow Swiss chard, golden beets and Russian blue potatoes along with fresh herbs among many other things from their garden and plan to add baby cucumbers for pickling and Egyptian walking

onions this year. Our meals included braised red cabbage, local carrots with preserved lemon, truffled acorn squash, pommes Dauphine and potato pavé with turnip and celery root.

Though dialogue had been reduced to the occasional "wow," we managed to ask Nikki what time breakfast was served as we had decided not to leave. In keeping with this, though Vicki had initially passed on the cheese course on the table d'hôte menu, we couldn't resist trying the Artisan cheese trio from the à la carte menu, which offered raclette, Little Qualicum fromage frais with roasted garlic and local camembert, adorned with spiced onion confit, pear and apple chutney, all served with an assortment of artisan crackers.

Vicki laughed as her "third" course arrived -- warm gingerbread gateau with a dollop of lemon preserve accompanied by red wine poached pear and spiced ice cream. Not normally a big eater, she had no problem polishing it off in short order. Though it was difficult to pass on just about everything on the dessert menu, I was especially intrigued by one dish, and white chocolate and grapefruit mousse gateau served with grapefruit marmalade and white chocolate ice cream didn't disappoint.

The spring menu will be released soon, but there is much on the present one to return for, including a tart made with pancetta, duck prosciutto and savoy cabbage (created by sous chef Steve Elskens), pan seared rockfish with butter poached prawns, quinoa pilaf and a salad of pea shoots and arugula. If dinner isn't your thing, a brunch menu coming during warmer weather will offer a pleasant weekend diversion, perhaps on the patio, which should reopen in May.

Afterward, we agreed that it was appropriate that this restaurant was opened in a house because we were treated like old friends from the moment we arrived. It's nice to see four people who are in the right professions.

WINE OF THE WEEK

A little more than \$20, Jackson Triggs' White Grand Reserve Meritage is worth splurging on. This award winning blend of sauvignon blanc and semillon is crisp and elegant with rich full, finish and a heady nose bursting with melon, citrus and a touch of oak. A perfect match with grilled halibut or cream based

pasta dishes, or on its own, in front of the fire.

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