

Well done, Raw Bar

Poolside dining at Hotel Arts' new eatery is an urban paradise

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It's an idyllic scene: Reclining on comfy wicker chaise lounges, draped in super-thick robes, you're tempted by the pool as the sun beats down overhead.

The cabana staff skillfully attend to your needs -- a mojito here, some tuna tataki or snow-crab-mango rolls there, a fresh towel to daub your perspiration. Ah, paradise, and the sounds of 12th Avenue are barely audible.

Twelfth Avenue?

Sure, poolside lounging at Hotel Arts may not be quite as exotic as Maui or Cancun, but it's a lot cheaper and quicker.

A little lunch-hour poolside getaway can do wonders for the soul. Not to mention the tan.

And for the tan averse, there's the cuisine of Hotel Arts' new Raw Bar restaurant (119 12th Ave. S.W., 266-4611), served in the shaded restaurant itself or under large outdoor umbrellas. Raw Bar is Hotel Arts' own restaurant, an all-purpose hotel dining room that handles breakfast, lunch, dinner and poolside dining.

(Just to clarify, Saint Germain, the stylish new bistro attached to Hotel Arts, is operated separately from the hotel and Raw Bar. Same property, different kitchens, different restaurateurs.)

Hotel owner John Torode, general manager Mark Wilson and executive chef Duncan Ly see Raw Bar as the next generation of hotel restaurant. They want it to be lively, comfortable and engaging -- a place where you can get good food at any given meal.

Tall, curved red columns sweep up to pin-spot-lit ceilings in Raw Bar, creating a look that's much different from most hotel dining rooms. A banquette curls along the wall, while huge red lounge chairs surround tables.

Glass doors lead onto the sheltered pool deck, where hardy swimmers have been seen in even the frostiest weather. When the sun is out, this will be a popular place.

Inside, Ly is putting the finishing touches on his new kitchen. A former sous chef at Catch, Ly is looking forward to the day when he has a full kitchen operating instead of the series of construction zones he's working in now.

Ly has designed an opening menu that allows him to deal with the current kitchen limitations while still being creative. The emphasis is big on seafood and has many Asian influences. There are rice bowls with barbecued duck and pork won tons, halibut cheeks with lentils and a coconut-curry broth and maple-glazed salmon sashimi. It's food with character, style and substance.

Perfect for poolside dining.

Wade Sirois and Jaclyn Labchuk of Infuse Catering are finalizing details for the fifth annual Calgary Culinary Treasure Hunt. Scheduled for Saturday, April 29, this year's treasure hunt will be a one-day event wherein teams of two scour the city for exotic ingredients.

If you're interested in entering a team, here's the skinny: Contact Infuse Catering at 269-3902 or infuse@telus.net for an entry form. Meet at 9 a.m. on April 29 at Infuse Catering (3510 19th St. S.W.) to draw a list of ingredients to track down over the day.

Regroup at the Calgary Opera Centre (1315 7th St. S.W.) at 5 p.m. to display your finds. At 5:30 p.m., the Golden Whisk will be awarded to the winning team and a feast including the ingredients acquired will begin.

The entry fee of \$100 per team includes two tickets to the feast. Non-competitors can attend for \$75 each.

Proceeds go to the Community Kitchen Programs of Calgary's Souper Stars, which teaches Grades 4 to 6 students about food, nutrition and meal preparation.

The 44th annual White Hatter Awards were held recently to honour those who do fine work in the hospitality and tourism industry.

More than 500 nominees in 28 categories, from bus drivers to bartenders, were put forward. Congratulations go out to all nominees and winners.

Here are some of the winners of the restaurant categories:

- Best server (upscale): Louise Remillard, Calgary Flames, Terrace Restaurant
- Best server (north): Christina Paterson, Ricky's All Day Grill, North Hill Centre
- Best server (south): Jenny Mayers, Little Chef
- Best server (downtown): Renee Philpott, Calgary Flames, Avison Young Club
- Best server (hotel): Tina L'Amant, The Fairmont Palliser
- Best server (fast food): Kelsey

Nemec, Starbucks, Marriott Hotel

- Best server (banquets): Lindsay Groulx, Calgary Exhibition & Stampede
- Best bartender: Scott Thompson, Heritage Park

- Best host(ess): Gustavo Yelamo, Centini Restaurant

- Best food service (kitchen): Joanne Quach, Marriott Hotel

Vintage Chophouse & Tavern (322 11th Ave. S.W., 262-7262) is closed for a few renovations. A recent flood caused damage to the dining room floor, so while it's being replaced, upgrades are also being made to the kitchen.

Vintage should reopen April 21, hopefully with part-owner and pro golfer Stephen Ames in attendance.

John Gilchrist reviews restaurants for CBC Radio One and has written six books on dining in the Calgary and Banff area.

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