

EATING + DRINKING

DAYS OF FUTURE PAST

Does Sanafir herald an awakening of the long-neglected, down-and-out Granville strip?

BY JAMIE MAW

IN THE LATE 1960S, from the age of 12, I commuted to school by bus twice a day up and down Granville Street. For the price of a 10-cent fare I had an outstanding education in cheerful drunks, inveigling conversations and the kindness of strangers. The night run was backlit with the soaring neon that lined the city's most exciting strip. Those signs flickered past the bus

just before I'd transfer to the West Van bus, I'd wave to Foncie Pulice, who over his 45-year career took pictures of hundreds of thousands of us with his legendary Electric-Photo camera.

I loved the Granville strip and I found my first job there. At 15, I wrapped packages in Birks' blue paper during the Christmas rush (Phil Gagliardi tried to tip me for wrapping

window—The Vogue, The Orpheum, Mortiffee Munshaw, The Commodore and dozens of lesser lights—like champions of the night. Out the window,

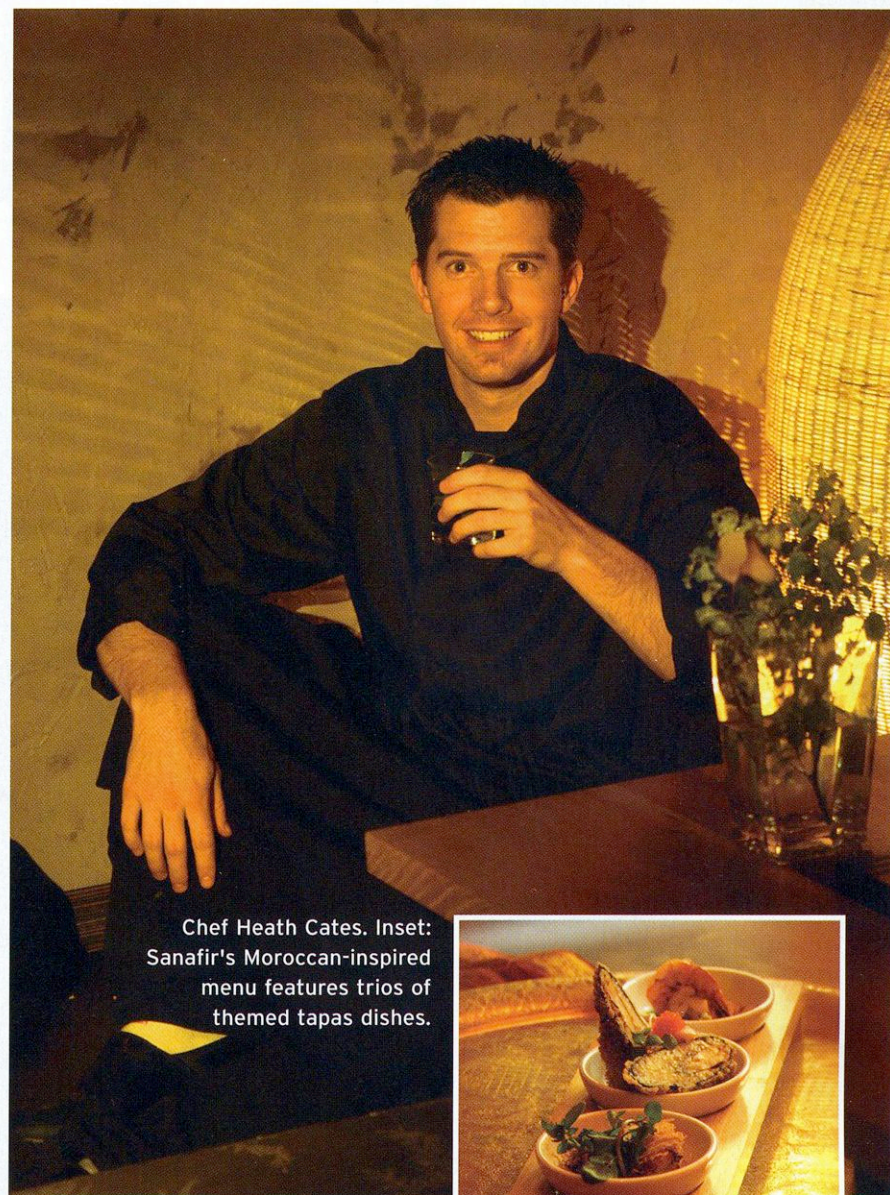
his mother's hairbrush set). I loved the pomp and circumstance of that Edwardian building, which, together with its clock, were civic icons (we had few) on the corner of Granville and Georgia. After work, I might take in a movie at the next-door Strand Theatre, which had a Cinerama widescreen. I saw a *South Seas* spectacle there, and *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Who could have guessed what 2001 would bring, right outside?

Just a few years later, somebody turned out the lights. Across North America, neon had become associated with urban decay, faint whiffs of which were seeping down Granville. Triple X-rated movie houses and seedy magazine shops took root. City council decided to extinguish the light that had sparked one of the most dramatic streetscapes on the continent.

While at UBC I drove a concrete mixer truck—I was a Teamster, Local 213, and I had the brownest left arm in town. In 1974 the wrecking ball hit the Birks Building's fine terra cotta facades, and before long my mixer truck and I were pouring the first load of an 1,100-cubic-yard earthquake raft (the Vancouver Centre tower has no underground parking lot). A year later, when I saw the faceless building rise up, I could think of only one thing: How shameful that our civic controllers had lost sight of our own blue sky. We had lost our past and soon other anonymous bank and office towers would crowd the city's most important intersection. Just up the street, the sheer white wall of Eaton's rose like a giant's latrine, further sealing the street from commerce, and further sealing Granville's fate.

And then came the blow that opened the deepest gash of all. The Electors' Action Movement-dominated city council voted to remove automobile traffic from Granville Street to develop a pedestrian- and bus-only concourse. Founded in the misguided optimism of pedestrian-friendly spaces that followed the giddiness of Expo 67 and Habitat, the strip became a bonfire of the urbanities.

Now I poured concrete coloured dusty-rose (itself a nasty foreboding of the next decade) mixed with aggregate from Saturna Island. I watched knotty-armed Italian artisans screed and bullfloat the mix into place. All of it soon turned to grey and grime. Strange concrete benches housed



Chef Heath Cates. Inset: Sanafir's Moroccan-inspired menu features trios of themed tapas dishes.



the homeless; drugs flourished as more established businesses—some on the street for decades, but now invisible to their patrons—went under. Contrary to the expectations of the day, pedestrians failed to materialize, and soon the scabrous replaced the unsavoury. The city's east-west fabric had been torn, right down our most important thoroughfare. In a monumental urban planning tragedy that flew in the face of our Jane Jacobs textbooks, Vancouver's downtown died a whimpering, pathetic death.

THE DINING ROOMS that Werner Forster bequeathed to the city before his death last year—Il Giardino, L'Orangerie, La Brochette, Il Palazzo, CinCin, Blue Water

and West among them—number the most beautiful ever built here. As a friend said at his memorial service, "Werner understood the human condition, that what we crave is intimacy and comfort and the opportunity to let light in, easily and timelessly."

Forster would appreciate the sultry light from the recently opened Sanafir, on Granville near Nelson, which glows inwardly from candles, long brass chandeliers and

harems of well-Chooed self-tanners. Outside, on this still-seedy strip, the nighttime panhandling is resentful and aggressive. In the shiny kitchens, there's more pleasant panhandling going on—this from chefs and cooks; it's more cheerful, if equally insistent.

Money is reshaping our urban template, finally connecting pod-like neighbourhoods that lie in a north-south axis strewn across the downtown peninsula. And if restaurants are barometers of economic change, Sanafir ("meeting place" in Arabic) may be a particularly gutsy precursor of what's to come. For not only does it represent the revival of a dying neighbourhood, it's also an early adopter in reconnecting Yaletown and Crosstown, and increasingly residential Richards and Seymour Streets, with the heady commerce of Robson, Burrard and Alberni.

Various remedies for the desolate Granville strip have come and mostly gone over the years. Blaine Culling, of Orestes fame, started several bars and promoted the notion of a late-closing, alcohol-primary "Entertainment Zone." But eating remained difficult, unless 99-cent pizza slices held appeal.

Then along came David Nicolay, inheritor of Werner Forster's design mantle. Nicolay's style is edgier, more ironic; it pushes the envelope (where others might merely lick it), touches our locality (especially in the beautifully rendered Coast, on Hamilton, with its bull kelp glamoliers and wooden motifs) but is unafraid to take it outside. In the case of Sanafir, that means rubbing Middle Eastern spicing over local materials, rather like what you'll find on the menu.

That might be because Nicolay, and his Evoke International Design partner Robert Edmonds, imprint a complete branding package. That includes name, graphics, interior and menu design, architecture, construction supervision and custom furniture, service wares, even staff uniforms. "Corporate identity, signage and graphics must not only complement, but challenge and enhance the interior/exterior design," says Nicolay. "Conversely, that architecture has the ability to enhance communication between space and object. It is these two aspects that must go hand-in-hand in the execution of a successful concept."

Nicolay's earliest restaurant was a clean-

lined neighbourhood spot in Kitsilano called Tangerine, which he built in 1999 and operated until last year, when he moved many of the staff to his new room, Habit, on Main Street. In intervening years he designed Glowbal (2001) for Emad Yacoub and Shannon Bosa-Yacoub, later adding Afterglow (2002) and Coast (2004) to their Yaletown portfolio.

For other clients he designed Crush in 2000, and Tofino's Raincoast Café. Today, Nicolay is redesigning the tired and forgotten Remington's, a 4,500-square-foot space in the Plaza 500 Hotel. "It's to become Figma," he says, "a name suggested by our client. And soon," he adds, "there will be another new room on the waterfront near Coal Harbour."

Sanafir's site, in a 10-metre high, narrow but deep two-storey loft, is an \$800,000 gamble. Nicolay has assiduously applied his function-forward design skills, but softened the edges with wood, papyrus, and intricately cut mashrabeya screens to punctuate the room. The design is unconsciously clever, a large cubic space neatly divided in three dimensions. It draws people to each other, which is, after all, the reason we dine out.

On a summer night, the lighting is also clever, and tidal. As the sunlight ebbs at close of day, the lights of Granville Street begin to wash into the room. The interior candles and chandeliers gradually suffuse the interior surfaces with diaphanous light; the effect is surprisingly cocoon-like for such a tall space.

If downstairs is more bustling souk, upstairs the casbah effect is accentuated; lolls of daybeds are separated by sheer curtains—the culinary equivalent of booking a room. "That," said my dining companion, "could get dangerous. The Dare to Wear lingerie boutique being right next door and all."

Below, a long common table bisects the front of the room; banquettes and deuces ring the walls. High, fluted coves in the walls harbour candles and flowers with suggestive stamen. Across an eight-stool bar, with ivory stools, a cheerful barman made us a themed cocktail called a Marrakesh Mint that combined Cointreau, apples, mint purée and cinnamon—mojito meets desert storm. We admired the restaurant's cool elements (the polished floor), warm elements (ivory walls

and dark wooden dividers and screens) and hot elements (the crowd).

The menu is a similarly composed, with wooden serving boards (\$14) showing three tapas-sized variations on themes of pork, beef, tuna, salmon, vegetarian and more. We ate cool, warm and hot elements of tuna: smoked albacore loin was the only off-note of the night; its bed of saffron-infused celeriac purée overwhelmed the gently smoky fish. But that board got back on its feet with a cool ahi spring roll, and then a two-bite piece of seared big eye with lemongrass cream. The stand-out was the trio of beef: served tataki-style with daikon; cappelletti: small, if slightly too-thick pasta hats of pulled oxtail with truffle cream; and a potent red-wine-braised short rib with smoky bacon and nutty dupuis lentils.

Side dishes of bread salad (with a wonderfully alert dressing) and grilled naan were very well made. Chef Heath Cates has developed an exemplary menu early in Sanafir's evolution—his panhandling is disciplined but playful. The trick now will be to rotate dishes through the seasons, to draw customers back long after the flavour-of-the-month arrivistes have moved on.

"Contemporary restaurant design should not ignore regional culture," designer Nicolay says. "But it also should not play up the stereotypes. Just as chefs amalgamate different national styles and flavours, we combine the use of culture, colours, materials and lighting with new technological innovations to create a spatial experience on par with the menu, yet never stray from our strict modernist approach."

Can a single restaurant attract the critical masses back to this desecrated scrape of downtown core? Will Sanafir's owners' brave foray bridge the great divide and provide the amalgam needed to reconnect Yaletown to points west? Not by itself, certainly, but as more elevated destinations follow the Yacoub-Bosa's lead (the Capital Six redevelopment to the north, more mixed-use development to the south, more emancipated thinking from local landlords), we just may be able to take back the night. And go home again. 1026 Granville St., 604-678-1049. *Sanafir.ca*