

EATING + DRINKING

JAMIE MAW ON MAIN STREET

Habit and Aurora show the way in a revitalized culinary 'hood

CHRISTINA BURRIDGE ON DEAD WINE

What to do with that no-longer-wonderful bottle of red



Nigel Pike (right) and his partners headed east of Kits to open Habit, one of Main Street's most inviting new restaurants.

"S

itting here, you can almost hear the arterials hardening," my dining companion said. The sleeve of her blouse threatened to brush the pot of sea salt off our table, but I doubted she was referring to artisanal salt and its effect on our vascular system.

No, she is an expert in real estate matters, and it was clear she was referring to Main Street, where I was about to take a bite of very good flat iron steak. Main Street (like some other north-south arterial drives) is recasting its future in 60-seat restaurants, designer shops of local pedigree, second-storey galleries and edgy bars that flourish without benefit of fruity vodka panty-removers. Here at David Nicolay and Rob Edmonds' Habit, where neighbours and crosstown diners stream in after work, the modern Canadian rec-room décor is a grab, and so, for the most part, is chef Greg Armstrong's confident small-plates cooking.

"You've got a point," I said, pleased to have evacuated Kitsilano for the morning. Earlier we had wandered into a new shop called Jonathan + Olivia to admire, from afar, the \$225 jeans, and next door in an architectural design gallery called Tyler Jones, antlered silver steins. Displayed in a sleek tableau, they called out for ironic admiration if not exactly my brand of beer.

Vancouver used to be a city; suddenly, excitingly, it has becoming a collection of villages, each more distinct than the last, as if distance from the city's heart also divorces them from the homogeneity that high rents demand. Just as local ingredients (and, increasingly, local chefs) inform our regional cuisine, so do the retail shops and galleries far away from Pacific Centre and Robson Street.

On Main Street, lower rents are just part of the attraction. For Nicolay and Edmonds, whose Evoke International Design has parlayed Yaletown warehouses into stylish restaurants for other proprietors (Coast, Glowbal, LK Dining Lounge), moving their own restaurant, Tangerine, from the lower Yew Street dining mall into the former Typhoon space on Main was fuelled by a desire to double their space, yes, but also to plumb a virile neighbourhood.

"There's plenty of foot traffic on Main," Nicolay says, "and local residents [he's one] eat out a lot. In Kits, the end of week and brunches were easy, but Monday through Wednesday was a challenge, especially in the rain."

Rent, the highest fixed cost for restaurateurs, is increasingly an issue in the city. On the West Side, especially along Fourth Avenue, leases are zooming well past \$30 per square foot. And in Yaletown they're edging even higher, with some murmured to be close to \$50, plus maintenance charges. By moving his operation to Main, Nicolay has more than doubled his capacity, from 32 indoor seats to more than 60, for about the same rent: he's paying approximately \$14 per square foot on Main, versus \$28 in Kits. As Vancouver menu prices cling stubbornly to five-years-ago levels, this is the equivalent of buying protection.

Nicolay and Edmonds also pulled a neat stunt in overhauling the old Typhoon space in just 10 weeks. With partners Nigel Pike and Wendy Nicolay, they called in industry marketers and midnight trades to install a brand new room, right down to the plumbing and electrics. For \$180,000, or \$3,000 per seat—about one-fifth the cost of recent downtown big box redesigns—he got something much more. Habit is an L-shaped, neatly efficient if hard-edged (more about noise in a moment) room, with a forest mural by Edmonds and an antlered stag head motif (I sense a trend) that ends, way over here, in a pretty, simple mirrored bar where there's not a martini shaker to be seen. It's the Canadian rec-room that cleaned up good and, with its modern references, much more a souvenir of Doug Coupland than of Mike Myers.

It's precisely here, perched on tomato soup-coloured leatherette bar stools, that we first bite into chef Armstrong's smoky sablefish

cakes (\$13). They perch on sunchoke and potato latkes and they're a great idea. After years of crab cakes, which are tasty but in their ubiquity like treading water, the sable and its horseradish aioli is a clean surf of flavour. The latkes want for just a topknot of good salt. This is a fine dish, the kind that gets copied, like chili squid tubes and, well, crab cakes: watch for it soon in a restaurant near you.

Highlighting the \$16 antipasto platter is some Wood's goat and Spanish sheep cheeses and ridiculously good duck sausage, feisty olives, two spreads (one, curry-inflected, enjoys a sense of occasion) and bread. Armstrong's shepherd's pie (\$14) is a loose curry over mashed potatoes, and the theme is almost repeated again with a small platter of Moroccan-spiced chicken wings (\$10); glazed with orange, chili and pomegranate, the spicing rucks cleanly.

Cornmeal-crust Fanny Bay oysters (\$9) are a lesser treat. The coating hardens as it cools, and although a generous portion—and even with the benefit of a smoked onion and chili-infused tartar sauce—they're one-note wonders. Accompanying white slaw provides additional crunch, but the brine has gone, along with the thrill. Sweet carrot and brie perogies (\$10) are little rumpus rooms of liquid velour. They're good, but they might be elevated to greatness with blue cheese.

My companion has been drinking glasses of blood-thinning Tempranillo, then Diablo cabernet; well-priced in the seven dollar range, they're in the midriff of a short wine list; bottles run \$26 to \$38. There's a quality selection of local draught beer (Checkvar tallboys are \$5.75) and half a dozen imports by the bottle, as well as highballs.

We arrived early and now, close to 8 o'clock, the room has noisily filled. We're reminded that hard surfaces cost less than soft, and that a righteous shag might be a useful concept, perhaps on the walls. But even I can't talk when I'm eating, and in the next plate—a Mayan-influenced stack of grilled-crusty rare buffalo stacked over layers of tortilla, black beans and sardo cheese with a lively salsa of charred tomatoes (\$14)—we found a year-round plate of substance and pungent flavours.

According to David Nicolay, it's chef Armstrong's ambition "to shift half the menu every eight to 10 weeks."



Forest murals and antlered stag head motifs give Habit's dining room a distinctive, Canadian rec-room chic appeal.