

CATCH RESTAURANT AND OYSTER BAR

Perfection on the menu at Calgary's five-star Catch

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Sun Media

June 24, 2007

The Canadian Culinary Federation named executive chef of the Catch Restaurant and Oyster Bar, Brad Horen, Canadian National Chef of the Year a few weeks ago after he and sous chef Patrick Gayler won the competition in Toronto.

Next, Horen will compete in Orlando and, if he wins there, will advance to Dubai for the world competition.

Horen says he will be including some of his winning dishes on his next Chef Tasting Menu.

The average diner could only be so lucky.

There are three places to dine at the Catch: A funky little patio right on the Stephen Avenue Mall; the Oyster Bar filled with booths and dark wood for a sophisticated but casual feel with fresh oyster flown in daily; and the elegant dining room upstairs with hardwood floors, tall ceiling and gorgeous, enormous chandeliers that appeared to be brass and hand-blown glass.

We had opted for the dining room -- a comfortable place I suspect can be very romantic in the evenings.

We sat with a wall of New England stone behind us and across from us a wall of windows and wine bottles, floor to ceiling, that makes you think you've died and gone to God's own liquor store.

Our very charming and knowledgeable server kept our Pellegrino topped up.

There is an amazing list of appetizers, including creamy smoked clam and oyster chowder, rhubarb vichyssoise and truffle-scented potato and leek salad.

Ian chose the seared smoked scallops with parmesan and arugula Salad (\$16.)

Our server delivered a beautiful teardrop-shaped plate. On one end sat scallops amid an aromatic balsamic reduction and delicate swirls of aioli. On the other end was a house-smoked cherry tomato and avocado bruschetta, along a thin finger of toasted baguette and a sliver of parmesan on a scattering of arugula.

Ian took his first few bites, and other diners could have been forgiven if they thought something untoward was going on at our table given the throaty moans he emitted.

You can tell when Ian is overwhelmed by the food.

Instead of just jamming it in, he takes very, very tiny bites to savour each morsel.

Finally, he was able to form real words. "The salad is first-class. Really, REALLY good," said Ian. "That smoked tomato really rocks. That's extraordinary."

His scallops were seared to perfection, caramelized lightly on the outside, tender and yielding to his fork. When the plate left him, it looked as though it had just gone through the dishwasher.

Again, the list of entrees is mouth-watering: Thai beef and prawn pad Thai with rice noodles and red curry coconut sauce; grilled marlin with crispy egg noodles, lobster and pineapple consomme and spicy grilled pineapple salsa; plus beef and chicken dishes for land lovers.



I ordered the haddock "fish n' chips" (\$17,) but this wasn't like any fish n' chips I'd ever had before.

There was malt vinegar, catsup and salt on the table, but the skinny fries didn't need any help. They were addictive just as they were, with a burst of amazing flavour in each crunch.

It came with sun-dried tomato/lobster aioli that beautifully complemented the crispy, herb-coated haddock.

Ian, meanwhile, has resumed the moaning.

This time, the object of his affection was the "paella" risotto (\$17) with a Cortes Island's clam, mussel and chili butter-poached tiger prawn.

"It's got peas, cucumber and crumbly little bits of bacon -- just wonderful," he offered. "I've eaten a lot of risotto in my time, and this is the best ever."

I had been warned before I went to the Catch prices would be high, but this kind of quality and attention to detail costs. And there is one reasonable Catch-of-the-Day option for two for \$30: Chef's choice of appetizer and entree.

I have never given a place five stars. There's always something that disappoints. Plus, the fact I brunch with picky eaters, they'll find something when I can't.

This time, those little voices saying, "Mmm, not quite there," fell utterly silent.

This is the best restaurant I've been in during my 13-year tenure in Calgary.

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FOOD: 5 OUT OF 5
AMBIENCE: 4 1/2 OUT OF 5
SERVICE: 4 1/2 OUT OF 5

LUNCH A LA CARTE WEEKDAYS

RECOMMENDED: PAELLA RISOTTO

PRICE: \$9-\$26

WHEELCHAIRS: YES