

Our Island paradise has some fine eateries; [Final Edition]

Pam Grant. Times - Colonist. Victoria, B.C.: Jan 4, 2007. pg. C.9

Last year was further proof of how lucky we are to live on Vancouver Island. Below is a list of some of the best spots I visited to keep in mind as you travel around in 2007.

Happy New Year and thank you all for your input and your tips. Keep them coming!

Acme Food Company

14 Commercial St., Nanaimo. 753-0042

This is one of those few places that does a bit of everything and pulls it off well. Begin with a cocktail from one of the best lists on the island with some fresh oysters and continue with sumptuous offerings ranging from amazing individual pizzas, pastas that you will finish no matter how full you are, grilled meats and Asian- inspired dishes. I have never had a bad meal here.

Atrevida

Galiano Inn, Galiano Island. 1-877-530-3939

Fine dining, with a spectacular view being the only thing that rivals the food and service here. Enjoy lobster topped with sandalwood smoked salmon garnished with spiced cous cous, and move along to smoked duck stuffed ravioli or rack of lamb with lemon and mint spiked risotto. Exemplary wine list.

Baan Thai

1117 Blanshard St., Victoria, 383-0050

This popular downtown spot with a loyal following offers good interpretations of classic Thai dishes including Tom Yum Goong, a fragrant soup loaded with prawns and mushrooms, or Gai Phad Bai Graprow, a heady mixture of chicken, fresh herbs, chillies, and peppers and well-made Phad Thai suitable for vegetarians or carnivores.

Barkley's Steak and Seafood House

Executive House Hotel, 777 Douglas St., Victoria. 382-7111

One to get dressed up for. Begin with venison carpaccio or palate- reviving gravlax before savouring top-of-the-line steaks, or take your pick from local trout, clams, mussels, halibut, salmon, crab or lobster. Wine list has some surprising finds and the room is big enough that you can enjoy an intimate meal.

Bistro 161

161 Kenneth St., Duncan. 746-6466

Comfort yourself with a bowl of red potato, corn and smoked bacon chowder while you wait for the patio to open in this little spot in downtown Duncan. Smoked albacore tuna with arugula and sliced melon and braised lamb, grilled chicken and seafood dishes with well-thought-out accompaniments are among the many reasons to visit.

Blue Fox Cafe

101-1919 Fort St., Victoria. 380-1683

Easy to spot due to the seemingly permanent lineup along the pavement, it's worth the effort to get a table to enjoy some of the best breakfast and lunch options in town. Try a breakfast quesadilla loaded with Jack and Cheddar cheeses, scrambled eggs, ham and scallions with a heap of pan fries or any one of the burgers that keep people coming back. Not open in the evenings.

Bistro Suisse

2470 Beacon Ave., Sidney. 656-5353

The owners of this casual restaurant think you shouldn't have to pay a fortune to have a good meal, and live up to this promise, so you had better make a reservation if you plan on visiting. The avocado and prawn dish appetizer was more than enough for a light meal. Try brandy-laced onion soup au gratin, or raclette to start but save room for bratwurst and rosti or scallops and prawns in a creamy Pernod sauce. European classics at affordable prices? Wow.

Cafe Ceylon

1175 Cook St., Victoria. 388-4949

Though the Bangkok floating market hotpot loaded with salmon, squid, prawns, vegetables and noodles is the dish that put this place on the map, nothing I have eaten here was less than amazing, from the Sri Lankan chicken curry with freshly cut sambals, to the chickpea salad that will have you rethinking the need to eat flesh. Don't leave without trying the housemade kulfi.

Cafe Mexico

1425 Store St., Victoria. 386-1425

Cheap drinks and bright colours make Cafe Mexico a popular spot for fun dining and it doesn't hurt that the food is good, too. A long list of quesadillas, burritos, tacos, flautas and the like are available in two sizes and with or without meat. Take the kids and save room for deep-fried ice cream. Casual, lively and affordable fun.

Coastal Kitchen Cafe

Parkinson Rd., Port Renfrew. 647-5545

Run by one-woman tour de force Jessica Hicks, this inviting spot offers freshly baked goods with a good selection of beverages for a quick stop as well as an impressive selection of burgers, salads, soups and stews for those who are wise enough to stay awhile. Stop in during

the summer and you might catch the cracked crab and chips, which you can enjoy while you sit in the aromatic garden.

Ebizo

604 Broughton St., Victoria. 383-3234

Busy but always welcoming, Ebizo has a great selection of sushi and sashimi, including ingredients you wouldn't expect, such as venison and smoked duck breast. Entrees are a little less exciting, but reasonably priced. Make sure to reserve a table if you plan to visit at peak times.

Ferris' Oyster Bar and Grill

536 Yates St., Victoria. 360-1824

A downtown hotspot with big portions of comforting food at reasonable prices. The food is always good but the service can take a hit if they are busy here. Local oysters served chilled, smoked or fried get things off to a good start, and hearty cioppino or bouillabaise will also satisfy any seafood cravings. Various Asian- inspired dishes round out the menu.

Fire and Water Fish and Chop House

Victoria Marriott Inner Harbour, 728 Humboldt St., Victoria. 480- 3800.

Beautiful dishes here can be impeded by uneven service, but I hear this has improved. If you are looking for a reason to use up all your allowable calories in one go, try the prime rib, marinated in wine, herbs and cognac, or else try one of the waistline- friendly seafood dishes.

Friday's

3000 Cobble Hill Road, Mill Bay. 743-5533

Good, hearty family eating is on offer seven days a week in this spot just north of the Malahat.

Dishes are priced right, with a great choice of breakfasts followed by soups, salads, burgers and sandwiches offered from late morning, with curries, beef stroganoff, pastas and the like rounding out the dinner menu. Nightly specials are worth a look.

Gina's Mexican Cafe

47 Skinner St., Nanaimo. 753-5411

Perched on a hill in technicolour glory, Gina's offers some of the best Tex Mex and Mexican food around. Start with an order of king prawns baked in cream and butter sprinkled with fresh coriander and a hint of spices before a plate groaning with enchiladas stuffed with moist chicken baked in fragrant red sauce served with plenty of rice and pinto beans and a stress-killing Margarita.

Glo Europub

104-2940 Jutland Road, Victoria. 385-5643

Besides the four-course menus available from Sunday to Wednesday evenings, this room, with spectacular views of the Selkirk waterway, offers insanely good beef carpaccio, creative salads and some of the best chicken wings I have ever had. Creative pastas and hearty entrees round out the menu.

Il Terrazzo

555 Johnson St, Victoria. 361-0028

A popular spot for affordable, quality dining for years with good reason, namely the attentive service combined with artfully prepared dishes and comfortable surroundings. Pastas are sinfully rich, meats are succulent, atmosphere is urban yet romantic. Try for a spot on the patio.

Irish Times Pub

1200 Government St., Victoria, 383-7775

An excellent choice for group get-togethers, the Irish Times offers upscale pub food as well as the expected variety of things to wash it down with. Share a platter with sea salt and pepper ribs, chicken wings, artichoke and Stilton crock, panko prawns and Irish potato flatbread with blue cheese dip, or potato skins stuffed with Stilton, bacon and caramelized onions before your group dives into the seafood tower made for sharing, groaning with local delicacies.

J&J Wonton Noodle House

1012 Fort St., Victoria. 383-0860

Quick, refreshing and nourishing are the three best words to describe dishes at this busy spot in Antique Row. Portions are good, the price is right and no matter what you order, you will see something at a nearby table you'll want on your next visit. A range of stir-fried dishes complements the lengthy list of soups and noodles. Be sure to check out the specials.

Knockanback Bar and Grill

4136 Wilkinson Rd., Victoria. 727-0200

A good spot to get together with friends for a casual meal. A large order of nachos here actually merits the title, but the stout, blue cheese and spinach dip is even better, though you might not want to share it. Meal-sized salads are representative of the large portions here, while ribs and steaks are house specialties.

Milano's Portofino Cafe and Grill

247 Milton St., Nanaimo. 740-1000

Mediterranean dishes abound in this comfortable spot a few minutes from downtown Nanaimo. Split a salad loaded with heart of palm, artichoke, avocado, diced tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers and shrimp with a glass or two of wine before diving into chicken Parmigiana, souvlaki, pastas or succulent lamb. Patio available in the summer.

Modern Cafe

221 Commercial St., Nanaimo. 754-5022

Trendy Nanaimo eatery with an expansive patio in the warmer months, the Modern Cafe lures people in with its mesmerizing neon sign but keeps them with friendly service and some interesting offerings from around the globe. Try steamed pork dumplings, blackened halibut with fresh fruit salsa or a bevy of seafood tossed with linguini and fresh herbs, but save room for sinfully rich tarte tatin.

Mo:Le

544 Pandora Ave., Victoria. 385-6653.

A great bet for weekend breakfasts, but be prepared to wait a little and remember that dishes like omelettes stuffed with local sausage, red onions, mushrooms and spinach are worth the time it takes to make them. Also a good choice for lunch and dinner with filling sandwiches, freshly made soups and thought-provoking entrees. Dishes are original and made with care and quality ingredients.

Nha Trang Maki Sushi

62 Kenneth St., Duncan.

In the mood for sushi but going out with someone who is in the mood for Vietnamese food? Happily, this place does both, so sample some maki rolls or gyoza before settling down for prawns and pork in caramel sauce, fragrant curries or braised seafood on a bed of crispy noodles. Soups abound and will cure you of any lingering sniffles in short order.

Paprika Bistro

2524 Estevan Ave., Victoria 592-7424

Tired of organic green salads on every menu? Me, too. Try the beet salad here, with orange segments, crisp fennel and Gorgonzola dressing for a tantalizing change. Follow up with comforting entrees such as local pork belly, slow cooked until unbelievably tender with a crisp exterior, served with green peppercorn jus and herb roasted potatoes.

Pho Hoa

765 Fort St., Victoria. 477-2356

Proof that fast food doesn't have to be bad for you, Pho Hoa offers a bevy of noodle soups with seafood, chicken or meat that you can customise with the addition of bean sprouts, chili, fresh herbs, lime and prepared condiments as well as platters with grilled meats and rice noodles.

Ric's Steak, Seafood and Chop House

910 Government St., Victoria. 381-7427

We liked everything here but the price of the wine. Fresh crab cakes with chipotle mayonnaise and grilled ahi tuna with wasabi lime butter will satisfy a seafood craving, but if it's a steak you're after, try the hand-carved New York. Wheelchair access available, but call for details.

Rosi's Bistro

1-4517 West Saanich Rd., Victoria. 727-3060

Nightly specials include Italian and West Coast dishes in this small but pleasant room 10 minutes from downtown. Antipasto platters feature select imported meats and cheeses, marinated vegetables and nuts making a pleasant diversion while you ponder the various pastas, risottos and grilled meats on offer. Thoughtful preparation and affordable prices round things out.

Ross Bay Pub

7-1516 Fairfield Rd., Victoria. 370-1152

A good choice for a casual meal and sports on the big screen, this pub offers some good dishes but the service has been uneven in my experience, ranging from fabulous to indifferent. All the same, the price is right and the effort is there, with a good choice of satisfying dishes including some mouthwatering burgers.

Samuel's by the Park

Queen Victoria Inn, 655 Douglas St., Victoria. 388-4488

If you don't go for the 60-item Sunday brunch, dinner is another affordable choice here with three-course meals available for \$20. Begin with spring rolls or a spinach salad sharpened with goat cheese before seafood cannelloni or braised lamb shank. Finish with ginger and vanilla-scented creme brulee.

Siam Thai

512 Fort St., Victoria. 383-9911

The welcome is always sincere here, which sets the tone for a bevy of dishes that perfectly combine the flavours critical to Thai cuisine: hot, sweet, salty, sour and bitter. Crunchy spring rolls with not a bit of grease, icy beer, soul-restoring soups and fragrant curries -- you cannot leave here in a bad mood.

Spice Jammer

852 Fort St., Victoria. 480-1055

Recently renovated, the Spice Jammer now has an interior to match the amazing assortment of fragrant dishes that have had Victorians visiting for years. Whether you stop in for a light meal of samosas and dhal, or go all out with tandoori-fired chicken, tender lamb or beef curries and a bevy of vegetarian options, you will leave satisfied.

Spinnakers

308 Catherine St., Esquimalt. 386-2739.

Still as famous for their fish and chips, served with vinegar brewed from their own ale as well as the insanely large portions of apple pie, Spinnakers also has some great cheese plates to nibble on while you decide what to choose from the large list that includes, steaks, burgers, hotpot and tourtiere. Especially good for a weekend visit with out of town visitors.

The Masthead Restaurant

1705 Cowichan Bay Rd., Cowichan Bay. 748-3714

A salad of local greens with house-smoked salmon with a glass of wine from the exceptional wine list will mesmerize you if the view hasn't already done so. Continue with cracked crab legs or a perfectly seared steak garnished with green peppercorn sauce and shoe string potatoes or slow roasted venison. Finish with artisan cheeses, dried fruit and a glass of Calvados while the sun slips away.

The Mark

Hotel Grand Pacific, Belleville St., Victoria.

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to dine like the rich and famous? Visit this tiny dining room steps from the Inner Harbour and you'll find out. No, it isn't cheap, but with choices including summer pea soup with sea urchin roe tempura and watercress cream paired with a salad of Dungeness crab and heirloom tomatoes, before harissa spiced scallops and chocolate marquis, it wouldn't be. Nor is it astronomically priced -- worth every penny and every calorie.

The Superior

106 Superior St., Victoria. 380-9515

A welcome addition to James Bay, with the focus on small plates and use of local free range and organic products. Share a plate of house pate with mixed greens, onion marmalade and cherries in syrup and crunchy baguette slices or stake a claim to your own pizza topped with marinated figs, goat cheese, prosciutto and caramelized onions while you absorb the amazing art that fills this former sailor's hostel.

Topo's Ristorante Italiano

218 Wharf St., Victoria. 383-1212

A good bet for traditional Italian dishes, including Osso Bucco Milanese, Veal Scallopini Limone and sundry pasta dishes, another reason to visit is the genuinely friendly service that this place was known for at their previous location a little north of downtown. Finish up with select cheese and fresh fruit or daily bread pudding. Please note there is limited access for diners using wheelchairs, so call ahead.

Vintage Wine Bar and Grill

Super 8 Hotel, 2915 Douglas St., Victoria. 385-6731

Victoria's only wine bar offers a good selection of the grape in affordable 3- to 9-ounce sizes with everything from small plates of grilled asparagus or hand-cut root chips to grilled vegetable cannelloni or prosciutto-wrapped chicken breast to tempt your palate. One to keep an eye on.