

Eating out in Vancouver

5 Sep 2009 by Nick Lander/ FT though this is longer

Around the table at Gyoza King, a great-value Japanese restaurant in Vancouver, Canada that is a well-known late night rendezvous for the city's restaurateurs, were three chefs. Each exuded a sense of optimism that I have not encountered anywhere for the past few months.

And each too represented this stunningly attractive city's broad racial influences.

There was the ebullient Vikram Vij who for the last 14 years has run two Indian restaurants, **Vij's** and **Rongali** next door, on a strict no-reservations policy. As a result, both restaurants still have queues of expectant diners waiting patiently outside every night of the week - a testimony to their enduring popularity.

Almost as voluble was **Thomas Haas**, the fourth generation of his family to be patissiers and chocolatiers. Born in Aichhalden in the Black Forest, southern Germany, Haas, like many now running their own businesses in this city, initially came out west to work for one of the major hotel groups but now runs an exciting café and pastry shop in the most unlikely of settings.

The quietest of the three was the only native Canadian. David Hawksworth did, however, cook for over 10 years at some of the best restaurants in London before deciding that he wanted to do so closer to the ski slopes. He has to be the most optimistic of the trio as his new 190-seater restaurant, **Hawksworth** in The Georgia Hotel, opposite the city's art gallery, will not open for a year.

The reason for their optimism is very specific. At the end of January 2010 the Winter Olympics will take place at Whistler, 100 km away, and bring with it a large influx of visitors and corporate sponsors. While the city is finalizing the RAV Line, an underground line from the airport and a major upgrade of the once-hairy highway out to Whistler, and more construction sites are being completed than I have seen in a long time, these chefs have their own plans.

Vij seemed to speak for all his colleagues when he said, 'The Olympics is a kind of silver lining. The last year has been tough but we are all buoyed now by the fact that these are now not so far away. The trickle-down effect will start to kick in over September and October and then we all hope that the games themselves will generate enough publicity for the region to see us through until the spring of next year.'

This outlook has precedents. John Bishop is the restaurateur who since he opened **Bishop's** in 1984 was the first to champion the quality and importance of local British Columbian produce, despite the fact that he was born in England, went to catering college in north Wales and ran a restaurant in Ireland. 'Our turnover doubled when we hosted Expo here in 1987 and this impetus lasted for a couple of years until we were hit by one of the cyclical downturns this region seems to specialize in,' he told me.

Hawksworth and Haas are gearing up for this period in very different ways. The former walks around with the plans and layout for his new restaurant permanently under his arm and is also finalizing the menus that he will serve while working as a chef on the numerous corporate and private events that the Olympics will generate.

Haas, meanwhile, is overseeing the construction of his second production unit for the patisserie and chocolates that have already established his name far and wide. One that will, he hopes, replicate the unexpected popularity of his first site.

This he built five years ago on a light industrial estate in north Vancouver where his neighbours are a large car mall and, in the far distance, a range of silos that hold the state's bulk produce for export. Directly opposite is a school whose pupils don't know quite how lucky they are.

At the last minute, Haas decided to add a 400 sq ft café to the front and this has now become the engine of his business. 'Our total sales are just over C \$3 million and C \$2 million of this come just from the café,' he explained before dashing behind the counter to help his wife, born in Jamaica to Chinese parents, serve the long queue of patient customers with, amongst other delicacies, a twice-baked almond croissant that was quite the best I have ever eaten.

Vancouver's exciting food culture, like that of so many other cities where none used to exist until quite recently, has grown on the back of the hard work and enthusiasm of numerous, determined individuals, some of whom I have mentioned above. Others include Mark Davidson, an Australian, who has taught many of the city's sommeliers; Yoshi Tabo, the ace sushi master at the **Blue Water Café**; and, Ian Dalziel, the self-proclaimed 'first mate' at **Rodney's Oyster House**, which are close to one another in the Yaletown district.

And like so many other cities across north America, many of Vancouver's restaurants are now choosing not to open at lunchtime but rather concentrate on the more profitable evening trade from 5pm.

This generalisation, however, does not apply to the city's Asian restaurants which are so numerous, so good and represent such good value, that they almost merit a detour in their own right.

Two dim sum lunches, at the **Shanghai Bistro Kitchen** and a vast branch of **Kirin** in a shopping centre on Cambie Street (from whose website this picture of chilli crab is taken), were distinguished by clean flavours, well-executed cooking and unusually friendly service. **Miku**, at the bottom of the Guinness Tower in the financial district, is the first branch of a Japanese company specializing in 'seared sushi', where the raw fish is subject to a few seconds under a blowtorch, to open outside Japan. My initial skepticism proved to be misplaced as the rice definitely had a creamier, richer feel to it.

But like many working in Vancouver's restaurants, I lost my heart to **Gyoza King** and not just because of the kitchen's adeptness with gyoza, stuffed Japanese ravioli. The service is friendly; the prices are reasonable; and despite its obvious physical modesty it makes two sympathetic boasts: firstly, that it is a 'sushi-free' zone, and secondly, its menu cover displays a photograph of the nearby countryside with the caption, 'What a wonderful sky'.

Vij's & Rangoli, www.vijs.ca and www.vijsrangoli.ca

Thomas Haas, www.thomashaas.com

Bishop's, www.bishopsonline.com

Shanghai Bistro Kitchen, 1124 Alberni Street, 604 683 8222

Kirin, www.kirinrestaurant.com

Blue Water Café, www.bluewatercafe.net

Miku, www.tora-corp.com

Rodney's Oyster House, 1228 Hamilton Street, 604 609 9941

Gyoza King, 1508 Robson Street, 604 669 8278