Raymonds of Newfoundland

9 Apr 2012 by W L Andrews

See our new guide to all readers' restaurant reviews.

Here is the second of our guest restaurant reviews. Believe it or not, we have received another review of this same establishment. Keep those reviews flowing in, please, to editorial@jancisrobinson.com. A bottle of Mouton '96 will go to the author of what I judge is the best one.

A visitor to my birthplace in northeastern Canada, the historic land of cod, mining and most recently a booming offshore oil sector, will find an unexpected discovery and an exquisite fine-dining experience. In St John's, the capital city of Newfoundland, once Britain's oldest colony, is a gem of a restaurant.

Geographically the city is on the same latitude as Paris. But the cold North Atlantic currents make for a very different climate and cuisine. For many decades the local cooking has flourished with fish and chips, fish and brewis (dried hard bread, cod fish, both salted and fresh, with crispy bits of fried fat pork), and Jigg's dinner, a local version of pot au feu with salted beef, named after the long-running comic strip *Bringing Up Father* by George McManus. All these three staple dishes are delicious and sustaining in their own right but can lack a certain refinement.

During the past 20 years there have a number of fine restaurants in St John's that have at times come close to making dining an art, but now in the early 21st century we have a new entry into the fine cooking arena that has hit a higher standard. That standard is based on local produce, meat and fish all cooked and presented with a decidedly European flair. Raymonds restaurant is located on the eastern end of Water Street, the mercantile centre of the city for more than 350 years. It is owned in a partnership and run by two energetic young men, Jeremy Charles, the chef de cuisine, and Jeremy Bonia, the manager and sommelier. The establishment is named after the sommelier's late father, Raymond Bonia and the chef de cuisine's late grandfather, Raymond Baggs.

Located in a beautiful historic classical edifice built in 1916 as the Commercial Cable Company offices, the building is now painted a vibrant orange in keeping with the habit in St John's of painting its houses in vivid and flamboyant jelly bean colours. With its strongly detailed classical facade including a paired pilaster and ionic capitals, a deep bracketed cornice and a pediment containing a folk-like cartouche, it reminds one of former times when fishing captains and fish merchant barons ruled the land. The interior is modest in size with only 12 tables, an elegant Edwardian décor with crystal chandeliers and tall windows providing a view of the busy historic harbour.

The restaurant has been attracting a lot attention since it opened in 2010 thanks to its superb cooking and attention to detail. There are no short cuts here; the breads, boudins, stocks etc are made from scratch on the premises. Raymonds' philosophy is one of providing a sustainable approach to fine dining while sourcing locally grown ingredients and supporting and promoting local purveyors. The restaurant sources its lamb from Morry's farms, an Irish Newfoundland family that has been raising sheep in Newfoundland for many generations. The lambs are raised on a small uninhabited island, appropriately named Sheep Island, just off the coast of the Southern Shore of Newfoundland. The island provides a sanctuary, free from predators and with ideal pasture for lambs who can feed off the natural salt grasses. This foraging appears to gives the lamb meat an almost pre-seasoned taste. The vegetables in season are from the 80 acres of Lester's farms in St John's. The Lester family with its six generations of farmers dates back more than two centuries to Poole, Dorset. This family is a testament to the persistence of the Newfoundland character in that they have been able coax a wide variety of crops from the largely infertile soil of Newfoundland for 200 years.

Mr Charles and Mr Bonia are a formidable team and they have enviable curricula vitae. While both Jeremys were in similar roles at a competing restaurant, they were selected as the #1 Best New Restaurant in Canada in 2007 by *enRoute* , Air Canada's in-flight magazine. In 2010 they won the first place in Gold Metal Plate competition (a sort of Canadian Olympics for food and wine pairing).

The winning dishes created for this event have been described by Toronto judge and wine writer William Chatto. His words give us an insight to the creativity and innovativeness of this culinary team: 'Wild rabbit meat is dark and flavourful but also lean and delicately textured. Charles used the complete lapin. The tiny ribs were frenched and cooked as if they were a rack of lamb - elfin but succulent. The livers were turned into a rich, creamy, silken mousse fashioned into a

teaspoon-sized quenelle and set upon a coin of fresh brioche.

'A purée of Jerusalem artichoke grounded a rich but refined ragout of local Brussels sprouts moistened with rabbit jus and spiked with rabbit bacon. A crisp little ravioli held braised rabbit meat, local chanterelle duxelles, a hint of date for sweetness and Canadian feta for salty tang - a spectacularly complex mouthful. Then there was the roulade of confited rabbit meat enhanced with duck fat, juniper and chives and pressed around the wee loin - an impeccably tender roll. Against such a doll's-house display of miniaturist technique, a firm, thimble-sized turned carrot soused in honey and butter seemed positively butch.'

Mr Bonia has extensive wine experience and has stocked the restaurant's wine cellar with an eclectic array of fine wines varying in price and reputation. He is adept at pairing wines with each course. He may serve an elegant dry Riesling from the up-and-coming Prince Edward County, Ontario, with fresh Prince Edward Island oysters or a fine premier cru red burgundy from the Côte de Beaune with the roasted Cornish hen with foie gras and cranberry brioche. In addition to the standard menu, a seven-course tasting menu with or without paired wines is also offered. The tasting menu may vary with the season but Mr Bonia's choice of wines is always impeccable.

In 2011 Raymonds was selected as the best new restaurant in Canada by *enRoute* magazine, pronouncing, 'he (Mr Charles) goes in deep with meat - a vertical tasting of veal chop, cheek and sweetbreads is a trifecta of tenderness - and he's expert with fish. However, his more particular distinction is that of root whisperer, coaxing the most intimate sweetness from parsnips, potatoes and Jerusalem artichokes, which he grows himself.'

What else needs to be said!

This is a restaurant that should not be missed; even if it requires a detour from your cross-Atlantic voyage.

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