

Burning Bright

Homer Street Café pairs Old World elegance with the rustic charm of a fine brasserie—all to set the stage for showstopper rotisserie chicken

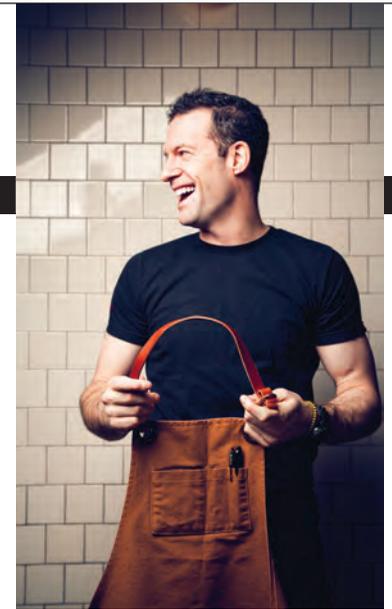
BY REBECCA PHILIPS | PHOTOS BY CARLO RICCI

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SUNDAY AFTERNOON AND THE brunch rush is in full swing. My friend Lenny reaches over to stab at his boyfriend's chicken cobbler topped with a (de rigueur) oozing poached egg. "My salad is lame," he says with a shrug. A staffer materializes out of nowhere: "Sorry to hear that. Was there a problem with the dish?" And Lenny flushes—truthfully, his salad of shredded rotisserie chicken and radicchio with a briny caper dressing wasn't lame. It just wasn't satisfying his grease and salt craving. (A follow-up dish of fried oysters with aioli-licked frisée did

the trick.) But points, we all agreed, for the server's affable professionalism. And for the wicked Chicken Marys (that's chicken-infused vodka with tomato juice) garnished with a piece of crispy chicken skin.

Homer Street Café is a restaurant at the no-man's-land intersection of Homer and Smith, on the fringe of Yaletown and the edge of Stadiumtown. But spiritually it exists somewhere between Soho's Balthazar and Paris's Gare du Nord brasserie. That might sound a little hoity-toity, but consider this: without exception, the first thing everyone says



after a meal there is that it doesn't feel like Vancouver. "There's a precedent here for both premium-casual dining and a West Coast modern sensibility," says designer Craig Stanghetta (Bao Bei, Meat & Bread, Revolver), "but we allowed ourselves to be inspired by historical references." The interplay of materials (handcrafted mosaic tile, reclaimed timber with a beautiful patina), the scale of the space, the vignettes that create private moments within the bustle of this rather grand café all add up to a room that's rusticity refined. A little messy, but with a sense of occasion. At the centre, monolithic Calacatta marble frames an open kitchen where a souped-up cherry-red rotisserie pumps out 250 free-range chickens per week—noteworthy because, gorgeous décor aside, that's really why you're here.

And so at dinner we ordered the signature rotisserie chicken, which was moist and flavourful, its skin deliciously tacky, the accompanying pee-wee potatoes lusciously slick with drippings. (Yep, rusticity refined.) Seated in the lower atrium, surrounded by buzzy, beautiful people, we were hard-pressed to remember that this was once a Chinese-Canadian greasy spoon. (Owner Lilliana de Cotiis and her executive chef, Marc-André Choquette, of the Loden Hotel, are masters at creating spaces where



FAVOURITE RETRO RECIPE? "EASY, OUR HOUSE-BRINED ROAST CHICKEN DINNER WITH THE FIXINGS: STUFFING, MASH, GRAVY, AND VEG"

—Chef Tyrell J. Shaw, *The Emerald*

RECENTLY REVIEWED

Craft Beer Market

85 W. First Ave., 604-709-2337. craftbeermarket.ca

→ The Salt Building (finally!) yields its next incarnation: an Olympic Village-speed sports bar with a heavy emphasis on artisanal suds, which translates into plenty of room (400 seats—but still beware weekend lineups), TVs on mute, and chat-compatible music from the '80s and '90s. The food is a titch above pub fare with burgers and smallish flatbreads for dudes and (warning: messy) lettuce wraps for the ladies, but you're not here for nachos (served here on a cask lid). You're here for the beers—140 on tap, not a bottle in sight. The tenders will walk novices through the bewildering array, but here's simple advice: forget distracting Trappist ales et al. and stick to the 13 rotating taps, or hit up Cask Tuesdays, starting at 4 p.m.

in value—a bottle of Blasted Church Big Bang Theory is an amazing \$37 here. It's such good intentions and great pricing that save The Emerald from some odd decisions. Potato skins, neither period-specific nor contemporary, have no business being on the menu, but how do you complain when your \$12 order could easily feed four as an appetizer? Or when the fish sticks appetizer, \$7, a nice mix of white fish and whipped potato, could easily be an entrée? The only true miss, a bland duck banh mi, was accompanied by a literal mountain of really good waffle fries. And on a busy Saturday do you really care about the fineness of the panko crusting or do you just want to jump, jive, and wail?

Mamie Taylor's

251 E. Georgia St., 604-620-8818. mamietaylor.ca

→ You'd better bring a date to rustic-modern Mamie Taylor's, because the menu of comfort food nibbles and smartly interpreted Down South classics is best shared—though your neighbours at the tall communal tables or the taxidermied menagerie on the wall make for good company if you're flying solo. Chef Tobias Grignon cut his teeth at the Wedgewood Hotel and Bistro Pastis; here, things are expertly executed but wonderfully casual. Sip on a namesake cocktail—the bright and fizzy Mamie Taylor blends bubbly ginger beer, scotch, and tart lime juice with a splash of Angostura bitters—as you plot your course of action: sweet, perfectly crumbling cornbread slathered in jalapeño bourbon butter; spoonfuls of creamy white cheddar grits topped by juicy grilled mushrooms and a bright egg yolk; perfectly crunchy fried chicken served alongside cinnamon-spiced spaghetti squash. Whichever you choose, snuggle in. **VM**

The Emerald

555 Gore Ave., 604-559-8477. the-emerald.ca

→ The last time a server in Vancouver cautioned that we might be ordering too much food was precisely never. It's a courtesy from another era, so it makes sense that when it occurred recently it was at The Emerald, the new Chinatown eatery that tries its damndest to channel the '60s as soon as you glide past its innocuous wood-paneled door on Gore. There are glass tops on the tables that look naked without an ashtray, a black bear skin and a stuffed marlin lifted from somebody's rec room, and, to drive the point home, Louis Prima blaring from the speakers. But once it comes time to sit down the pretence fades. There are 16 craft beers on tap, the cocktail list is even longer, and what the short wine list lacks in variety it makes up for



THE TICKET

HOMER ST. CAFÉ AND BAR

898 Homer St., 604-428-4299. homerstreetcafebar.com

ORDER

Half rotisserie chicken; chocolate pudding

HOURS

Lunch weekdays 11:30am to 2:30pm; dinner Mon. to Thurs. 5 to 11 pm, Fri. and Sat. 5pm to midnight; brunch Sun. 10:30am to 3pm

PRICES

starters, \$12; mains, \$20

indulgent afternoons ease into indulgent evenings.) We started with a crispy quail, carrot, and pistachio salad dressed with tangy yogurt, and a side of that outrageous crispy chicken skin. (I found it too much of a good thing, but it disappeared quickly—my boyfriend never met a deep-fried protein he could resist.) Clever sommelier Alex Thornley guided us through the “rare finds” section of the wine list, and we landed on a glass of Denavolo, a natural wine from Emilia-Romagna. We also opted for the feature roast, a veal loin with sunchoke purée and roasted chanterelle mushrooms (there was something in the autumn air because the next night at L'Abattoir we were offered a nearly identical dish), which, truth be told, was a tad dry—but oh, the chicken.