

Chefs without Borders Vancouver Magazine

Underground dining in Vancouver

By Jane Mundy

Denis King, a film set designer, is celebrating his 40th birthday with some close friends –Lavine M. with a Zonda Nellis shawl draped over her shoulders, Daryl M. who lost a million in dot.com bombs, Carol J. with a push-up bra and low-cut leopard print top, Jeremy S. whose gaze is locked on Carol’s cleavage – at an underground and illegal “dining room” in a semi-industrial area off Broadway and Main. From the outside, the house is nondescript; a turn-of-the-century ramshackle place that hasn’t seen a coat of paint for years. But inside, taste in décor and food is eclectic. Every available space is filled with gilt-framed oil paintings, futuristic wrought iron sculptures and the proprietor’s great-grandparents’ Italian oak furniture. And the aromas of roasted garlic and rosemary mingle with fresh baked baguettes and balsamic vinegar permeate the dining room where a 12-foot table is set with silver and white linen.

The menu tonight reads like the tasting menu at Lumiere: seared sea scallops on tarragon risotto is followed by a pear and rosemary sorbet that opens for the rack of lamb with eggplant and roasted pepper relish. And there are seven more courses to go. Little wonder underground dining rooms exist...

At first two or three guests are apprehensive and one even feels like a gatecrasher—some people can feel intimidated stepping into a stranger’s home—but they soon relax after an hour of cocktail party atmosphere. “I can guarantee a pleasant experience,” says Marion, the Chef/Owner (by request, first names only). “It’s a warm atmosphere here and nobody is rushed, like going to your friend’s house for dinner.” Around midnight, over dessert and coffee, Marion and her two servers join Denis and his friends for a glass of port and reverie.

At another establishment a few blocks off Commercial Drive, reservations are as difficult to get as Club 54 was in its hey-day. The phone number is unlisted. There’s no point in phoning anyway because you can’t get in without already having been there or through someone who has (and covets) the number. If you are fortunate enough to gain entry, park at least one block away. And the Chef/Owner is unforgiving if a customer screws up (all I can tell you is that he’s from Winnipeg, 30ish and his name is Bob). Like the Soup Nazi, he dictates whether you’re in or out. One no-show and you’ll never get back on the list.

The house itself is about as unsuspecting from the outside as a grow-op in Surrey: a boxy little bungalow that’s just another house on the block. But once you step inside, the drab exterior is forgotten. The interior has been gutted and replaced by an original 50s diner, complete with vinyl upholstered booths, curved chrome bar and bright vinyl swivel stools. The front windows are concealed with funky black-out curtains (of course) and

framed comments from guests spanning twelve years line the walls like commemorative plaques at a legion hall.

The kitchen is about the size of a restaurant's walk-in refrigerator and buzzing with frenetic energy – blenders whirl with mango cocktails, apartment size ovens heave with platters of Pad Thai and jasmine rice, a Kitchen-Aid whisks mountains of egg whites – and there's stuff crammed from floor to ceiling: a mishmash of 50s-style glassware and Fiesta ware plates scramble for shelf space. One can't help but wonder how this guy pulls it off.

This one-man show does pull it off and by all accounts, Bob is wildly successful with the heathen buffet crowd. But underground restaurants aren't for everyone. After all, they are illegal. The proprietors run the risk of getting busted, but so what? The food and booze police can't pull their license because they don't have one to begin with. As far as tax evasion goes, what's there to audit – some friends come by for dinner. All the time.

In the fickle culinary world, you have to be really good to keep your customers coming back, especially in this situation where clients are all from word-of-mouth. You're only as good as your last meal. Or different. At Bob's place, twelve guests can sit in the dining room comfortably, at one seating per night, but 18 have been known to squeeze in. Considering the amount of food prepared, more than twelve seems a miracle. The menu constantly changes and judging from his client list, if the majority come back only three or four times a year, Bob doesn't have to spend a dime on advertising. That's a good thing because, judging from the gargantuan amounts he dishes out, food costs must be exorbitant. The only complaint is that there is too much food.

Unlike Marion's offerings, where portions are measured and each course served with elegant restraint, Bob's menu is weird and whacky and service is more like a free-for-all. He's like a maniacal amateur cook sifting through a cookbook, finding the craziest recipes and cooking them all. His menus are loosely termed "theme nights" that can be anything from Hawaiian with fluorescent fruity cocktails to Deep Woods USA with slabs of smoked meats.

Although the menu tonight is supposed to be Asian, it's more like a hodgepodge of recipes beginning with Egyptian eggs soaked in coffee and ending with heaps of fruit tarts and some coconut concoction. The bowls of prawns with saffron just keep coming. Everything is passed around from one guest to another until they finally get sent back to the kitchen. That must be a first—too many prawns. And judging from the collection of liqueur and wine bottles at the bar, his guests bring too many bottles of booze. Everyone knows to BYOB (bring your own bottle).

Both places charge about \$60 per person, tax free of course. Geoffrey Howes of the BC Restaurant Association doesn't see a problem in asking guests to cover food costs. He sees the illegal issue as the BYOB component. It is illegal to charge corkage anywhere, and the government looks at a food contribution as a corkage charge.

Which explains the cloak and dagger routine (unlisted phone numbers, no last names). For most people, opening a restaurant is a pipe dream; the costs and loop holes required to meet zoning, building and health requirements alone are prohibitive unless you have buckets of cash and friends at City Hall. And without having to pay fixed costs (such as rent, insurance, advertising and promotion, employer-paid benefits) profit margins widen. There's no law broken by inviting anyone over for a nosh and asking them to throw in sixty bucks each and to 'BYOB'. But once money is made, this constitutes running a business from home.

Rosemary Hagiwara, Manager of License Office for the City of Vancouver, says that "to have an establishment that serves alcohol, not only is a restaurant license needed, you also need a dining lounge business license which requires a liquor license from the province." And the building has to meet health issues and occupant requirements with multiple exits, sinks, etc. So strike out residential homes on all counts.

Legalities are not an issue at Jim Haynes's atelier on Paris' left bank where he has served thousands of meals to strangers since 1985. And it's ironic that in the city of gourmets, 80 to 130 people will flock to his place every Sunday night for mediocre food and boxed wine. The main attraction is to meet people.

Private dining rooms can be the perfect place to go and not worry about sitting next to a total bore— chair-swapping is the norm. Some of the best dinners can be with strangers; stories can run rampant with people you may never see again. "I wouldn't mind someone inviting me, sounds like a good idea", says Geoffrey Howes, "but a lot depends on the quality of food". Or the company, especially for singles. Liz Kihlman, 45 and single, is a frequent visitor to Vancouver's underground restaurants. "The food is just one component", she says. "After an intimate dinner with a mix of friends and strangers, who knows, you could wind up with a new best friend".

Denis King and his guests give their reasons for coming to Marion's: no rush, warm atmosphere and delicious food. And since there aren't taxes to pay or wine to buy at restaurant prices, the bill is about half that of West or Lumiere, for example. Naturally, price is a major factor in making these establishments popular, particularly when you aren't paying whooping great mark-ups on wine.

There's no way of telling how many underground dinner parties operate on a regular basis. They will never become mainstream in Vancouver; there are too many excellent restaurants here. But for the intrigue and mystery, for an 'over the top' dining experience and a novel way to entertain friends or meet people, it's a great alternate dining experience. Just one problem: how to get on the list. Or maybe start your own underground dining experience...

