

A beautiful view on the boardwalk in front of The Beach Club Resort in Parksville.

DESTINATION

**PARKSVILLE
QUALICUM BEACH**

SAVOURING PARKSVILLE QUALICUM BEACH

Come for the beaches, stay for the food

BY JANE MUNDY



I can't count how many times I've visited Parksville and Qualicum. I keep coming back because there's always something new to discover in this area's eclectic food world, and in be-

tween eating there's the beach, and birds.

This area has become a food lover's destination partly due to a changing demographic. Sure, people still come here to retire but lately it has attracted a younger crowd, including crafters and cooks, farmers and brewers, and they have created a sea change. For decades these two neighbouring towns were populated by retirees and families who flocked here during the summer. When dining out, it was likely at the waterfront restaurant Shady Rest, which has been serving fish 'n' chips and clam chowder since 1924. Expats frequented the Black Goose Inn for traditional English dishes like the Scotch eggs and shepherd's pie that are still on the menu.

The new and wildly popular Fern + Cedar Brewing Company (standing room only at 2:00 p.m.) also features chowder, along with plant-based dishes such as roasted broccolini and I wanted to buy a gallon of the amazing pickles that accompany the chicken ▶

DESTINATION

**PARKSVILLE
QUALICUM BEACH**

tenders. The space itself is filled with natural light and 500 hours went into building the gorgeous—and expensive—cedar wall. Combined with the community picnic tables on the patio (bound to be a summer hit), and excellent brews—my personal fave is their IPA Green Mountain—maybe they weren't bonkers to open December 2021, in the midst of the pandemic.

PARKSVILLE QUALICUM OFFERS

food lovers top-notch home cooking too. Like countless others during the pandemic, I'd been baking sourdough and thought it was okay—until I bit into the walnut and fig loaf at Wild Culture Bakery. All the breads are sourdough and talk about artisan—most of the flour is stone-milled fresh onsite and used within hours. The pizza is famous—locals know to place online orders. By the time we showed up on Friday afternoon they had sold out (over 100) but we procured a slice each of heavenly olive oil cake and lemon tart and sat outside on the gorgeous garden patio. We left with enough dessert and breakfast pastries to fill the fridge in our well-equipped kitchen at the Beach Club Resort. From our deck we toasted the stellar view overlooking Parksville Beach with a glass of pinot gris from Blue Grouse Winery (a quick detour near Duncan) before strolling downstairs to dine under a dome at the resort's Pacific Prime Restaurant. Surrounded by twinkly lights, whimsical décor and stars above, it was like stepping into a fairy tale.

Both the dome and the Pacific Prime restaurant menus reflect this area's rich bounty: sockeye salmon from the Salish Sea; duck and cheese, honey and organic produce from the Cowichan and Comox valley's farms and the



1. The Grotto Spa at Tigh-Na-Mara.
2. A couple enjoys dinner in the historic dining room at the Black Goose Inn.



3. The Dining Dome at the Beach Club Resort in Parksville.
4-5. Fresh Milk on tap at Morning Star Farm.



wineries and craft beer have become destinations unto themselves. Vancouver Island's BC Ale Trail includes Mount Arrowsmith Brewing Co., which has garnered several awards, including "Brewery of the Year" and nearby LoveShack Libations is a nano brewery with big flavours and attitude.

The new owners of Little Qualicum Cheeseworks at Morningstar Farm (both an attraction with a petting zoo and demos for the kids) showed us around—you can also take self-guided tours and be sure to check out the fresh milk dispenser. It has also received awards for its cheeses over the years. We sampled their Bleu Claire, Island Brie, and umami-rich aged blue cheese and checked out the source—these cows are treated well, and they can even waltz up to the back scratcher!

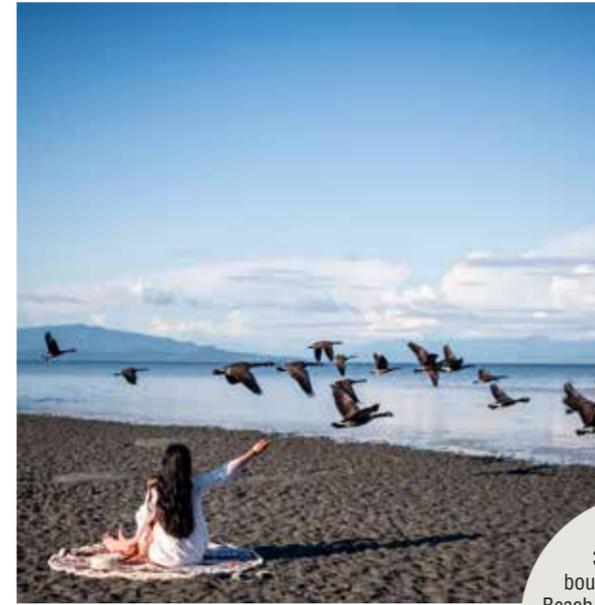
Blue Grouse also appeared the next evening at a winemaker's dinner, a frequent event at the Qualicum Beach Café. The seafood tower can't get much fresher and 72-hour braised short ribs slid off the bone as soon as it hit my table. Recent owners Eli Brennan and Alan Tse (also the chef), have made The Qualicum Beach Café (formerly the CView restaurant at the Qualicum Beach Inn) their second restaurant, coming from Water St. Café in Vancouver's Gastown. "I look forward to working with the local suppliers and let's have some fun," says Brennan.

BIRDS AND BEACHES

Of course, there's a lot more going on in Parksville/Qualicum Beach than eating and drinking. Life's pretty beachy for both people and birds. On my last trip here I met Christopher Stephens, a local ornithologist with more than 18 years birding experience, through Pacific Rainforest Adventures. He took me to Englishman River estuary where many birds flock to from Mexico. It's almost exotic.



1



3. Faire Living boutique at Qualicum Beach 4. Volunteer Gillian Walker feeding long-time resident Sandor at North Island Wildlife Recovery Centre.



2

1. Birdwatching with Christopher Stephens 2. Little Qualicum Cheeseworks Farmgate Store.



3



4

The mudflats and saltwater estuary are great for seeing without disturbing wildlife. Step up to the viewing platform for a great panorama: one side is mud flat and the other a salt marsh; behind is woodland and river and forward (in the distance) is the ocean. We drove on to Hamilton Marsh, 10 minutes from Qualicum Beach. More than 100 species of birds have been recorded in this huge wetland, making it a favourite spot for birders. Try booking a morning tour when there's more feeding action and you can walk out of the estuary basin to Englishman River. Give yourself at least two hours and bring rubber boots.

I revisited the North Island Wildlife Recovery Centre in Errington, near Parksville, and was greeted by Dr. Lynne Brookes, former president of Arrowsmith Naturalists and long-time volunteer here. With a doctorate in environmental education, she understands how a greater awareness of nature—and its dangers—has increased the number of visitors over the years. A lot of repeat visitors (like me) come here to see the long-term residents like bald eagle Sandor. Ray, a recent arrival, is a five-year-old black bear.

"She was close to death; wandering around emaciated and wobbly with head trauma," says Brookes. "Now she is healthy. She is still on anti-seizure meds due to head trauma, so this is her home for the rest of her long life. With medical care she has also been habituated to people and knows how to open her mouth on command—it helps with a teaspoon of jam. Tomorrow she might only want peanut butter or grapes."

Well tonight when I get home, I want Little Qualicum Cheeseworks Island Brie with Wild Culture sourdough and a glass of Blue Grouse's estate white wine. Or two. 🍷