



The creations of chef Peter Zambri of Zambri's blew the Iron Chef away with perfect preparation and smart presentation.

iron chef eats victoria

Our resident culinary master seeks out the best of Island fare. **BY ROB FEENIE**

EVERY TIME I hop on a float plane or take the ferry to Vancouver Island, I feel like I'm on a great journey: beautiful scenery, a relaxed pace and, increasingly, a top restaurant scene, with locals creating some of the most inventive cuisine on the West Coast. My wife, Michelle, and I recently popped over to try out a few spots that have been showing up on the foodie hit lists.

Stage Wine Bar

THE CHEF George Szasz

THE AREA The "emerging" neighbourhood of Fernwood, about a 10-minute cab ride from downtown. (The restaurant is

right across the street from the Belfry Theatre, hence its name.) It's a swell old spot with lots of exposed brick, and a sweet bar made from reclaimed bowling alley wood.

THE MENU We started with a seriously addictive langos (fried potato bread) with garlic and olive oil—and mustered enough willpower to stop eating. A house-made falafel with tomatoes, cucumber, red onions and tzatziki was fresh but a tad too salty, while the edamame beans with garlic, shallots, chili and lime were simple and perfect. Finally we went with "cheeks and frites"—beef cheeks au poivre, with garlic and lemon aioli with a side of pomme frites with parsley, piave and gar-

lic. Suffice it to say, I almost ordered a second entree of the beef cheeks—they were that good. All washed down with a Twisted Tree Viognier Roussanne from the Okanagan and a Castillo de Monseran Old Vines Grenache from Spain.

THE VERDICT George and I went to cooking school together way back in 1985 and I've always been impressed with his mastery of anything that uses paprika—a true Hungarian—and his rural style of cuisine that is so tricky to get right. The room has an authentic, rustic vibe (the daily menu is on a chalkboard) that goes with its seriously down-to-earth pricing.

1307 Gladstone Ave., 250-388-4222, stagewinebar.com



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Zambri's channels an old-school, handcrafted ethos with its dishes. Ditto Pizzeria Prima Strada, whose wood-oven baked pies (below) the Iron Chef declared the best in Canada.

Mo:Le Restaurant

THE CHEF Andy Miller

THE AREA Tucked away beside Chinatown in Victoria's bohemian district—this is where the cool kids come to eat.

THE MENU Only breakfast and lunch here. I started with Mo's Biscuit—and what a start. It's a buttermilk biscuit with a house-made aioli piled high with cream cheese, scrambled eggs, bacon, basil, roasted red peppers and havarti. A United Nations of ingredients, but they work in beautifully messy unison. Michelle decided to go for Mo:Le's version of huevos rancheros with organic *frijoles piquante rojo* (spicy red beans) and goat cheese, two house-made tortillas, fresh lime, avocado, cilantro, house-made salsa and roasted apple. In my experience huevos is a tough dish to mess up, but it's equally tough to make it memorable. Here the ingredients were light and fresh, skirting the usual heaviness of the dish.

THE VERDICT I brought some of their hot sauce home to Vancouver with me. This place eschews any fancy-pants flourishes in favour of honestly pre-

pared, organically sourced food in a relaxed environment.

554 Pandora Ave., 250-385-6653, molerestaurant.ca

Pizzeria Prima Strada

THE CHEFS Sean Bender (Cook Street), Matt Veillette (Bridge Street)

THE AREA Downtown in funky Cook St. Village, featuring a massive brick wood-fired oven—a must for any serious pizzeria. Another smaller location is on Bridge Street, an industrial part of town.



THE MENU We started with an antipasti spread of salume, verdure, formaggi, pane and olives and a tight little fresco salad with fennel, orange, red onion, grapefruit and mint—but we were here for the pie. It's made in the classic Napoli style, which means the flour

is imported from the old country and the sauce is Italian plum tomatoes, sea salt and nothing else. We started with a basic margherita: Fairburn Farms mozzarella di bufala, tomato sauce, fresh basil and sea salt and finished with prosciutto. Simple, but bold—each ingredient playing a part in a pizza symphony. We



Feenie declared Stage's edamame beans with garlic, shallots, chili and lime "simple and perfect."

thought it couldn't get better until we ordered the *funghi* with porcini cream, roasted mushrooms, roasted onions, fresh thyme mozzarella and pecorino. And immediately ordered another one. We finished the gorging with a *salsiccia picante*, with house-made fennel sausage, tomato, mozzarella and roasted peppers. Again, genius.

THE VERDICT This is the best pizza I've had in Canada—did I mention I ordered two of the same one? A great, laid-back atmosphere and decent wine list—both also very Naples.

230 Cook St., 250-590-8595; also 2960 Bridge St., 250-590-4380; [pizzeria primastrada.com](http://pizzeriaprimastrada.com)

Zambri's

THE CHEF Peter Zambri

THE AREA An open-kitchen concept in a drab location near a London Drugs, but they are moving to bigger and better digs two blocks closer to downtown on Yates Street.

THE MENU I know I'm off on the right foot when an Italian joint starts me with a glass of Prosecco (in this case from the excellent producer La Pergola). From there we had warm mozzarella di bufala with artichoke hearts in a mild tomato sauce, not a showstopper of a dish but well executed. Ditto the next course, a deliciously simple stracciatella and egg drop soup done in the Roman style. It's nice to find a chef who isn't forever trying to put his own spin on dishes that have stood the test of time. We ended with a local rockfish served with marinated tomatoes, roasted peppers, olives,

oregano and potatoes—rustic Italian perfection.

THE VERDICT This may be my fave place in town. It's not the latest in cutting-edge Northern Italian cuisine, but they deliver the classics, thoughtfully prepared with local ingredients. Bonus: the wine list has some great obscure Italian selections.

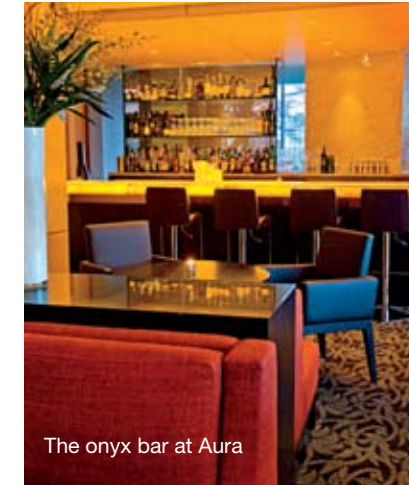
101-911 Yates St., 250-360-1171, zambri.ca

Aura

THE CHEF Brad Horen

THE AREA A sleek room complete with onyx bar located in the new Inn at Laurel Point downtown. Expansive views over the harbour.

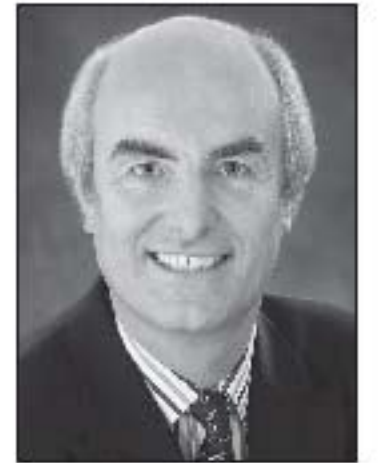
THE MENU We started with a beautifully balanced coconut scallop bisque with a spot prawn escabeche and chili oil, and a mango puree. Followed it with pan-roasted and bacon-wrapped sablefish with truffle potato perogie with salsify, cassis and braised cabbage, a wickedly complicated dish that highlights the deli-



The onyx bar at Aura

cate flavour of black cod. To finish we had a lamb duo: grilled lamb rack, caciocciatore lamb sausage, soft garlic polenta, tomato confit and olive jus, a dish that blends the rustic with the complex.

THE VERDICT Chef Horen is at the top of his game—he has a great room, excellent support staff and his kitchen is turning out some of the best food in Victoria right now. Perfect for the big dinner out. 680 Montreal St., 250-414-6739, aurarestaurant.ca



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sweet spots across the west

From the Pacific to the Prairies, we found lovely (little known) sugar stops.

BY JOANNE SASVARI

RAISE THE NANAIMO BAR A Nanaimo housewife invented it in the 1950s—every other story a damned lie, we say. Graham cracker bottom, custard centre, chocolate topping come together as the Nanaimo bar. We love the version at Secrets Bake Shop in Parksville, north of Nanaimo (*Island Highway E, Parksville, B.C., 250-248-8825*). “I only use good quality ingredients. I don’t use any additives,” says owner and baker Tara Bohn, who makes her Nanaimo bars with a pure vanilla cream filling, instead of the traditional bright yellow custard powder, and tops them with dark chocolate.

BERRY GOOD Dried fruit is pretty good, but like most things it gets better when coated with sweet, sweet chocolate. That’s where Okanagan stalwart Tickleberry’s (*Main St., Okanagan Falls, B.C., 250-497-8862, tickleberrys.com*) comes in. Most people there will be ogling the 72 flavours of ice cream, but bypass the lines and seek out the original Tickleberry, a tart dried blueberry enrobed in rich milk chocolate. Good and good for you. (Sort of.)

SHAKIN’ ALL OVER The Hitchin Post Drive-In (*100 12th Ave. SE, High River, Alberta, 403-652-2966*) doesn’t look like much. It’s just a modest wooden shack that’s open only half the year. But from this humble setting come some of the best milkshakes you’ll ever taste,

made from real ice cream in whatever flavour suits your mood. Go classic—basic strawberry, chocolate or vanilla—or creative with mixes like kokomint with rich chocolate and refreshing mint.

THE PERFECT PIE The quintessential Prairie pie filling is the saskatoon-berry—like an intense little blueberry. For the perfect slice visit the Berry Barn (*830 Valley Rd., 11 kilometres south of Saskatoon, 306-978-9797, theberrybarn.com*) where they harvest the berries from their 27 acres of bushes. A bit of advice—call them saskatoons or you’ll sound like an Easterner.

TERRIFIC TORTE Winnipeg loves the schmoo torte. The Jewish delicacy is a caramel-pecan-and-whipped-cream layered cake made by moms who love their sons too much. Dessert Sensations (*505 B Saint Mary Ave., Winnipeg, 204-284-4661, dessertsinsations.com*) makes a particularly decadent version layered with toasted pecans, high-butterfat cream and extra caramel sauce.

Official Nanaimo Bar Recipe

From *nanaimo.ca*.

Bottom Layer

- ½ cup unsalted butter (European-style cultured)
- ¼ cup sugar
- 5 tbspc cocoa
- 1 egg, beaten
- 1¼ cups graham wafer crumbs
- ½ cup finely chopped almonds
- 1 cup coconut

Melt first 3 ingredients in top of double boiler. Add egg and stir to cook and thicken. Remove from heat. Stir in crumbs, nuts and coconut. Press firmly into an ungreased 8-by-8-inch pan.

Middle Layer

- ½ cup unsalted butter
 - 2 tbspc plus 2 tsp cream
 - 2 tbspc vanilla custard powder
 - 2 cups icing sugar
- Cream butter, cream, custard powder and icing sugar together. Beat until light. Spread over bottom layer.

Top Layer

- 4 1-oz squares semi-sweet chocolate
 - 2 tbspc unsalted butter
- Melt chocolate and butter over low heat. Cool. Once cool, but still liquid, pour over second layer and chill in refrigerator. Delicious. *wl*

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