

Inn at Laurel Point leaves diners smiling

PAM GRANT DINING OUT

Aura

Address: 680 Montreal St.

Tel: 250-414-6739

Hours: Daily from 6:30 a.m.

Major credit cards and Interac accepted. Wheelchair accessible.

★★★★ 1/2

What a difference a year makes. When I last visited the Inn at Laurel Point for a meal with friends, we were met with blank stares by staff at the front desk. On my most recent visit, Margaret and I were warmly acknowledged by two smiling faces in the lobby as we arrived and again when we left.

I can't say I was too surprised. The concerted effort to provide good service was evident when I made our dinner reservation and was politely asked if they could accommodate any special

requests such as table preference or food allergies.

Aura is a pleasant room, with understated, modern decor. Many seats offer excellent views of the Inner Harbour. Al fresco dining on the patio will be available in May or sooner, weather permitting.

We visited on a Sunday evening and once seated were promptly advised of the evening's specials, the one item they were out of and that there would be live music in about 90 minutes. (Duo Greenlaw plays Sunday evenings from 8-10:30.)

The menu is appealing, if weak with regard to vegetarian options, though I am sure the kitchen would be able to handle requests for someone who wanted something other than a goat cheese and tomato tart for an entree.

Appetizers range from \$12 to \$18, with the majority around \$15, and main courses begin at \$25. If you're on a budget, fear not. Sunday evenings feature a

three-course menu for \$33 which changes monthly.

We were tempted, but opted for selections from the a la carte menu. Appetizers include a couple of intriguing soups instead of the usual cop-out of "Pacific seafood chowder" that local hotel dining rooms seem to cling to. Scallop bisque is finished with vermouth, a seared scallop and slices of boudin noir, rich ham consommé is garnished with truffle and honey glazed pork, pickled apple and vegetables. We probably would have had at least one of these if not for the other Sunday night feature, which provided an opportunity to try three of the regular appetizers for \$20, making an affordable option for two people sharing, as well as a good light meal for one.

We devoured a platter with large prawns covered in crunchily shredded wonton wrappers dipped in warming togarashi mayonnaise, a few warm edamame beans, slightly

overcooked chicken Karaage lightly seasoned with teriyaki sauce, pleasantly contrasted by pickled shiitake and shimeji mushrooms and sweet pineapple.

The standout was undoubtedly the risotto, which featured Haida Gwaii charterelle mushrooms, marscapone cheese, pancetta, finished with a whisper of truffle oil and a dollop of broccoli pesto.

Entrées include some well-thought-out fish dishes such as Queen Charlottes snapper with spot prawn chorizo, Dupuy lentils, roasted red pepper and dried olives. Again, tempting, but we were both in a red wine/red meat mood.

Margaret was very pleased with her choice of AAA Alberta New York steaks, with local wild mushrooms, double-smoked bacon, baby potato ragout, and a sauce featuring Zanatta Pinot Nero. It tasted as good as it looked, but I thought a few green vegetables would have

RATINGS

★	Below bad
★★	Below average
★★★	Average
★★★★	Above average
★★★★★	Excellent

helped balance the intense flavours and dark colours of this plate.

I had a good selection of colourful vegetables, as well as rosemary scented fondant potato with my main course, which included a couple of good-sized lamb chops and too small a portion of flavourful braised shank. Portions were generous, and it was some time before we could indulge in dessert. I finished with house-made ice cream while Margaret tackled a trio of confections — chocolate paté with white chocolate and raspberry cream, a shooter of raspberry soda topped with ice cream and cocoa maroon raspberry sorbet topped

with berry compote.

Overall, it was an enjoyable dinner, with good to excellent food and good service. I caution that there is a fine line between attentiveness and hovering, however. We were both a little irritated by the rush to clear away plates when only one of us had finished. Still, a little training will resolve this and the need to reach over diners to pour their wine while they are eating.

WINE OF THE WEEK

You can get cheaper Shiraz from Australia, but at around \$20 a bottle the one from Wynn's Coonawarra Estate is worth the money. Oak is used to mature and increase the complex nature of this wine, but does not dominate. It has aromas reminiscent of ground black pepper and berries. Full, rich flavours make this a good tipple on its own that will also pair well with roast and grilled meats, tomato-based pasta dishes and full-flavoured cheeses.