

The Dish

The fantastic affordable Feenie: no joke

ALEXANDRA GILL
FROM WEDNESDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL
JULY 23, 2008 AT 9:06 AM EDT

VANCOUVER — First up, full disclosure: I am a fervent, unabashed Rob Feenie fan (and it has nothing to do with the fact that he writes for this newspaper).

To me, he's a brilliant chef capable of exceptionally refined, regionally inventive, unapologetically rich cooking that tickles my taste buds in all the right spots.

I can't recall ever eating a dish at Lumière or Feenie's - while he was still in charge of the kitchens - that didn't make me swoon.

So, do Mr. Feenie's new dishes for the Cactus Club Café come close to reaching my blissful memories of culinary nirvana on West Broadway? No, nor should they. This is an entirely different (much more affordable) league.

Do I think his recipes raise the bar for the casual fine-dining chain, which recently opened its 19th location, Bentall 5, in downtown Vancouver? By leaps and bounds.

Has Mr. Feenie lowered himself by becoming the "food concept architect" for a large corporation? Absolutely not. Given the circumstances, it was probably one of his smartest business decisions.

In the bigger scheme of restaurant things, it doesn't matter what anybody thinks of Mr. Feenie's new position or his food. The new flagship Bentall 5 would have rung up enormous sales with or without him.

The massive, \$6.5-million glass cube sparkles like a glistening oasis in a parched desert of office towers. When we sauntered up last Friday at 6 p.m., the wait time was 1½ hours. According to the hostess at the door, the lineup hadn't slacked off since noon.

This being the Cactus Club, the servers are, of course, all women - young, perky, mostly blond, extremely thin women in tight skirts. But in all fairness, the ones I met were extraordinarily friendly and well versed in the menu.

Bentall 5 is definitely more sophisticated than most. There's an \$850 bottle of Penfolds Grange on the reserve wine list. Veuve Clicquot Champagne is available by the glass. And there's some impressive original art: three Basquiats, a Warhol and a Brent Comber.

But back to the food, which is the main reason I went. We snag two stools in the lounge as we wait for our table (it only takes an hour) and start off with some snacks. The fiancé is disappointed when I tell him we will not be having the rocket salad, which covers a golden panko-and-parmesan crusted chicken breast nestled in a pond of buttery lemon-caper dressing. This was one of the few "Feenie" dishes to roll out early at other locations. I've eaten it twice; he's had it four times. We already know we love it.

Tuna tataki (\$12.50) is a very pretty, generously portioned spread of barely seared albacore splashed with orange segments, cilantro, papaya (green and ripe), grassy olive oil and yuzu dressing. Three miniature, certified Angus beef sliders (\$11) topped with sweet chili relish hit the spot, but the buns are slightly stale and the aged cheddar is sliced woefully thin.

After being escorted to the dining room, we share a plate of butternut squash ravioli (\$16). If you loved the original at Lumière, you'll be disappointed with this slightly deflated version, sweetened for the masses with a sprinkling of crushed amaretti cookies, though still rich with mascarpone cheese. If you've never had the pleasure, your arteries will seize up in truffle oil bliss.

The only real disappointment is the prawn and scallop spaghetti (\$19). The tomato sauce has that mouth-puckering earthy taste that comes from too much paste and dried oregano.

At the moment, Mr. Feenie only has about a dozen dishes in circulation - many pre-Feenie deep-fried pub standards remain on the menu - and none of his additions are labelled. (You'll have to ask your server to point you in the right direction.) His dishes will eventually be rolled out to other Cactus Club locations.

I suspect his brand name is missing from the menu for the same reason he's being called a "food concept architect." Some people think this title is a joke. But the fact is, if he had been an "executive chef" and promoted as such, he may have been setting himself up for a lawsuit. After leaving Lumière, Mr. Feenie was bound by an iron-clad non-compete clause in his employment contract.

He's probably earning more money now than ever. And should there be any legal troubles on the horizon, he has the power of the Cactus Club behind him.

Mr. Feenie has no doubt made some poor business decisions in his career. This was not one of them.

Bentall 5 Cactus Club Café:

588 Burrard St., Vancouver;

604-682-0933.

Recommend this article? 13 votes

View the most recommended

SPONSORED LINKS

[Find Travel Agents - Use Tripology](#)

Find the Best of Over 7,000 Travel Agents - Save Time & Money. Travel & Leisure ...
www.Tripology.com/

[Tourist & Business Visas](#)

Visa to China, Russian, Brazil & 100s of counters worldwide, US visa appointment...
www.immiGroup.com

Travel