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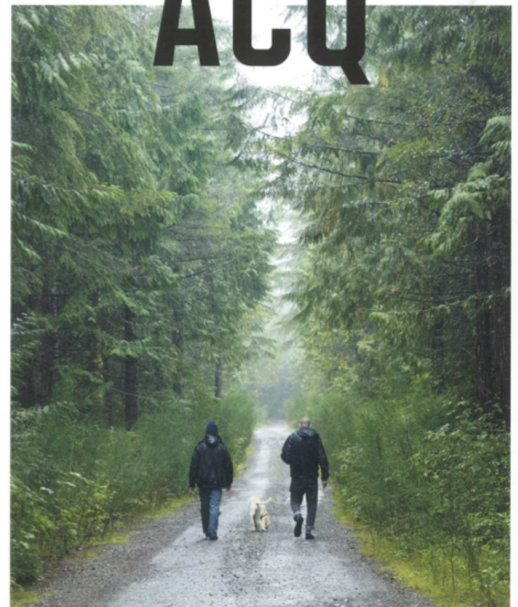
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ACQ



EXPLORING THE HUMAN INGREDIENT BEHIND FOOD CULTURE





WOLVES OF FOURTH ST.

WORDS BY DARIAN HOCKING | PHOTOS BY KYLER VOS

Leading the pack at one of Canada's best restaurants is Nick Nutting, a chef who understands that just as important as the quality and taste of his food are the people creating experiences around it.

Driving through Vancouver Island on your way to the very edge of its west side, you pass through awe-inspiring, untouched West Coast wilderness. Amongst towering, protected, old growth forests and sweeping mountain ranges, you drive the only road in and out, littered with tight twists, turns, switchbacks and hairpin corners, hovering high over lakesides and roadside rivers that bustle downwards from the mountain tops toward the ocean. This drive, despite its intricacy, melts stress away as you descend, with the rivers, to the ocean. Your mind begins to clear and your senses take over, starting with the smell of cedar, fir and coniferous trees, a rich organic musk and eventually a pungent salty air at the shores of the Pacific.

AS YOU TRAVERSE THE ROAD into Tofino, you can't help but notice two very distinctive spaces. To the right is a deep dense forest that beyond its edge is as black as the night sky. To the left you have a smattering of trees that have been pushed, pulled and shoved by the wind, the rain and any combination of seaside elements. This 33 kilometre stretch slowly paints a vibrant image of what exists here; the supernatural sight gradually and mysteriously develops as you enter the Pacific Rim National Park. An unwound window delivers the freshest air you can imagine. Quick glimpses through the trees of the ever expanding coastline and the subtle, eternally crashing waves on the seemingly endless stretches of pale sandy shores tease you and create a consistent sense of anticipation. This place is in no uncertain terms magical.

The western coast has been my favorite go-to spot for many years now: escaping for just a quick weekend to unwind and casually walk the misty, smooth sandy beaches; to get lost in the dense fog during storm season or to stop and watch the unparalleled sunsets.

A micro district perched on a peninsula on the southernmost extremity of Clayoquot Sound, Tofino was first established in 1909 with the opening of a post office. The vibe in this small town is so unusual, so relaxed and unconcerned that most of us would probably miss it if it weren't located at the end of a road. From any beach on this stretch of land, looking west toward the horizon, you realize that the next stop across that great Pacific Ocean is Japan.

Despite its remoteness, Tofino does not lack in activity. It is filled with bicycle and surf shops, a handful of mom and pop stores to peruse and many talented artisans. The vibe is easy, the locals are friendly and you feel welcome to cruise around at your own pace.

Within this town of laid back locals there is a remarkable group of friends creating a truly unique and special space. Nick Nutting, Jorge Barandiaran and Hailey Pasemko have spent years working in the restaurant industry, hanging out and cooking together. Inspired by the time spent molding their friendship through food, beverage and good times, they opened Wolf in the Fog in 2014, and remain focused on creating a space that is not only welcoming but also outstanding. Years before the Wolf in the Fog venture began there was a gathering in which this group assembled to participate in the preparing of a family style meal. The comfortable atmosphere from it was detectable by all, leading to a very honest realization that their lives and careers would most certainly revolve around food.

The affable Bobby Lax – who acts as the director and purchasing agent for the restaurants and members of the



Jorge Barandiaran

Tofino Ucluelet Culinary Guild – is one such individual also at that dinner and has spent some time working with Chef Nick in other restaurants. His background in both business and philosophy has served him well, even as he worked at various wineries and oyster farms across Canada. But his true offering is the ever-valuable connection between local food supplier and the chef.

In 2010, the TUCG was formed by a group of restaurants who came together with a very real dilemma: a need for fresh, local food and produce for their menus from a producer-rich island, but no daily access due to the remoteness of the two towns. In a typical city, the farmers market serves the function of the guild, but to pull together producers and suppliers in order to supply the community plus delivery is where the challenge has been until its formation.

Realizing they could buy together and support food producers that they respect, a successful fundraising effort with the local community took place, ultimately leading to the creation of the guild. It is a unique interpretation of the very idea of association, providing a slight take on what a guild does. Creating a "Made in Tofino" solution, it offers ingredients such as dry goods, fruits, vegetables and meats. The guild truck travels between the entire south of Vancouver Island from North Cowichan to the Saanich Peninsula, picking up produce and ingredients



Nick Nutting



Bobby Lax

from Comox Valley, Port Alberni. In conjunction with this gathering of sorts, they also receive various other provisions ranging from seasonal produce sourced in the Okanagan, to maple syrup from Ontario.

It's mid-afternoon when I sit down with Chef Nick, fresh off the lunchtime service, apron still tied when he greets me. Knowing the energy that pumps out of the kitchen during a service you'd think he'd be completely shattered, but he's in good spirits and extremely down to earth. It is clear that he is in his element.

Nick didn't set out to be a chef. Instead, he innocently developed a passion and appreciation for cooking as he paid his way through an economics degree. He was continually intrigued by what was happening behind the kitchen counter as he hustled food and bused tables. His interest piqued and Chef Nick eventually went to Calgary, Alberta to attend culinary school. He then made the foray into fine dining where he stayed for a number of years, honing his craft and fostering his love for food before realizing he had a different vision for his skills. This vision included his fiancé Hailey and his friend Jorge.

The synergy between Chef Nick, his team and ingredients are unlike any other, and together they embody a tangible energy you can't help but notice. The menu is centered on the very food that he and his team want to eat: a considerable amount of time goes into developing the

menu and other offerings, inspired by the gatherings they would have as friends. Knowing intimately about what's in season in this secluded area of the world, Nick tells me that before adding an item to the menu he not only considers what might pair well with a given item but he invites input from his team in the kitchen. At times the menu just comes down to the local availability, what he has in the fridge or a classic recipe he hasn't had in awhile. Many factors go into the creation of the dishes, none of them ego. That honest simplicity through his food represents the feeling of the town in which it resides, irrespective of food trends and the latest molecular combinations.

A simple staple and yet a perfect example of what you might find on the menu is the notorious, ridiculously delicious, superbly executed potato crusted oyster. This appetizer involves the meticulous wrapping of cut-to-order shoestring potatoes around a fresh oyster, then quick fried and served on a dollop of Dijon mustard. It's so incredible that you find yourself craving it months later. Nick simply strives to provide good honest cooking, something that he achieves and surpasses easily.

Jorge Barandiaran is responsible for the smooth running of the front of house. In my handful of visits to the restaurant, I can vouch for the fact that he has done an extraordinary job at equipping each and every member of his staff with the favorable ethos of the restaurant. He attributes the success of the restaurant to the atypical fact that he works with some of his best friends who lead by example – Chef Nick, Bar Manager Hailey, Pastry Chef Joel Ashmore and Sous Chef Marty Dean. He notes that it's a treat when the rare moment allows them to have time off together to hang out and repeat the process of cooking and sharing a meal, in the same way that they did as a team before opening Wolf in the Fog. His trustworthy assessment regarding the sign of a good restaurant is summed up by the question, "Would I go back?" and in the day and age of what seems to be ubiquitous 'questionable' service, Jorge has got his staff dialed in. Every server feels like a welcoming friend, excited to have you over for dinner.

Bar Manager Hailey Pasemko spends her days caring for and maintaining her herb garden, foraging for the newest drink recipe she's working on and ensuring that the same level of quality with your first sip is as memorable as your last. After spending a great deal of time with the rest of the leadership of the restaurant which always included cooking dinners and spending time together, she carried that idea forward with the clever inclusion of punch bowl drinks. Often times having a sweet version on the menu as well as a spicy one, the fun nod to the past is evident through the vintage serving bowls, glass ladle and mugs from which to enjoy your beverage. Following the



same parameters that echo the values of supporting local producers, everything is locally driven with homemade ingredients in the cocktails.

The design of the space is warm and inviting, slightly refined and decidedly West Coast, punctuated with perforated copper lighting fixtures and pendants. As you walk up the stairs and into the dining room, your first sight is what is fondly referred to as the cathedral of alcohol, a towering wall filled high with a plethora of bottles and concoctions.

While you wait for your food to arrive you can look through the open kitchen to see it humming along, observe and take in the prepping, corresponding, cooking and plating, ultimately noticing the team is having fun. If watching this camaraderie inspires you to do so, feel free to partake in the menu option of buying the kitchen a six-pack! As your meal magically makes its way to your table, one more detail that you note is how it sits on charming vintage plates adding to the nostalgia of old friends and good times.

This establishment provides a rare mix of authentic, enthusiastic, proud and committed staff in various positions, jovially welcoming you to come in, take a seat, kick back and relax. Restaurant experiences like this are few and far between this notion of being engaged by the staff, and is often overshadowed by giant ego and copious





amounts of superfluous pretension. Wolf in the Fog, on the other hand, is where you come to tap into the vibe of the West Coast, the people here and the ingredients of the dishes.

The instrumental, calculated combination of the people behind this restaurant is paramount to their continued and noteworthy success thus far. Just over 15 months of operation have been well documented by the volume of customers they've already served. The sense of fulfillment with which this restaurant operates from is bursting at the seams with an unchecked vibrancy and a pure labour of love. Much like a craftsman takes pride in his painstaking handiwork, so too the people at Wolf in the Fog, carefully creating an experience worth talking about, and especially, worth making the trip for.

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