

Where the coho grows with flavour

Tofino's Wolf in the Fog revels in being 'rugged and fearless' – perhaps with a glass of Ladies Who Shoot Their Lunch

Wolf in the Fog

150 Fourth St., Tofino;
250-725-9653; wolfinthefog.com
West Coast cuisine, casual dining;
small plates, \$4 to \$18; large
plates, \$15 to \$32; sharing plates,
\$45 to \$100
★★★

REVIEWED BY
ALEXANDRA GILL

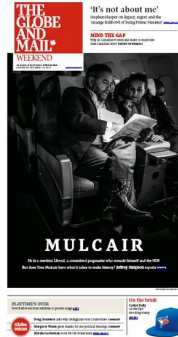
Coho is not the fattest species in the salmon family. But in the hands of Nick Nutting, this lean fish is transformed into a rich, meaty feast worthy of bold red wine on a cool misty night.

The executive chef at Tofino's Wolf in the Fog starts with a fresh-caught wild salmon – only ever fresh – landed from the fisherman's wharf just a block away from the restaurant. In daylight, you can actually see the boats coming in through the tall sea-view windows in the second-floor dining room.

Mr. Nutting cleans the fish, leaving the head and fin intact, and fills the cavity with wild rice, bacon and mushrooms – the latter foraged from local woods (last week, it was chanterelles).

He roasts the whole fish, basting it intermittently with nutty brown butter, until the silver skin is scaled with a golden crisp. Before serving, he uses more brown butter to thicken a cup of tart evergreen huckleberries – a late-ripening fruit indigenous to the Pacific Northwest that look like Gothic cranberries – and ladles it over the filling.

At the table, the glassy-eyed coho arrives on an antique family-style platter with the hearty stuffing spilling out of its belly and the glossy purplish-black jus



The dishes at Wolf in the Fog are tantalizing both to the tourists from nearby resorts, as well as the locals. JOHN LEHMANN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

staining its pale pink flesh.

Grrrr! This must be why Wolf in the Fog has often been described as “rough, rugged and fearless.”

Actually, quite a lot has been written about this unassuming beacon shining its sharp fangs from the remote, weathered edge of Vancouver Island's west coast. Last year, it was named the best new restaurant in Canada by enRoute Magazine. Just last week, in this very newspaper, Chris Johns anointed Tofino “the finest food city in North America,” singling out Mr. Nutting and his crew as the alpha cooks of the microlocavore pack.

Wolf in the Fog is indeed great; yet, it needs to be understood in context. It is not a restaurant that could be easily translated to Vancouver, Toronto or even Victoria. This is a refined juke joint that perfectly encapsulates its time and place. And that is, absolutely, its charm.

The building itself – a soaring two-storey A-frame panelled in cedar and filled with black tufted-leather booths – looks, at first glance, like an upscale chain restaurant.

But then you notice the fossilized salmon wolf sculpture doctored out of driftwood and the wall-hanging sunburst waxed

together from broken surfboards. The lighting is dim, vintage blues howls from spinning vinyl, the knives are horn-handled Laguiole. And it is all perched over a surf shop, which could not possibly make it any more holistically branded to this cool hippie-commercialized town.

Yet, if you take the beverage program as an example, Wolf in the Fog is totally of the moment. If only in Vancouver we could find martinis stirred with nasturtium-infused vodka, the only Gruner Veltliner grown on Vancouver Island (from de Vine), and rare gems, such as Ladies Who Shoot Their Lunch from Fowles Wine in southern Australia.

For a man who trained in Calgary (Chase) and Montreal (Garcon!), Mr. Nutting really does understand West Coast seafood. He knows that B.C. oysters are only just now, in the colder waters, ripening up to their true potential. Of course, he has been serving the smoked oysters – doused in truffle oil and individually wrapped in fried potato strings – all year long. The signature appetizer is so popular he would be strung up if he did not.

But he readily acknowledges that this is peak oyster season. And that is why he is folding local Black Pearls into velvety chowder and offering them purely clean and shucked.

The kitchen can be a hit and miss: charred Humboldt squid – chewy, blackened and perfectly balanced with a fish-funky citric Vietnamese salad is out of this world; pickled salmon is a bit too gummy, drowned in creamy slaw and tasteless iceberg salad.

The Spanish Bombshell is a

perfect party dish – chock full of scallops, clams and gooseneck barnacles, ruined only by the fact that you cannot reach the royal tomato broth buried deep at the bottom of the punchbowl serving vessel.

The Southern Block Party platter to share is memorable for fried chicken that is not too squeaky under the wings and barbecue ribs that stick to the bone (as they should). But really, the dish only stands out on its own because it is the sole barbecue in town.

This restaurant, which sells itself on meat and fish, should be better known for its Green Soul. The daily changing vegetarian dish was an awesome standout the day we went, with its Dijon-roasted spaetzle, braised sprouts, pear gastrique and daikon chips.

These extreme measures are what make Wolf in the Fog special. Sure, tourists are tantalized by the free shuttle from all the big resorts. But the locals are also seduced by its everyday fare.

“I’m late for work,” one steel-toed regular customer told his server in the downstairs Den at lunch. “But I can’t stop eating these Portuguese eggs. You’re right. They’re the best I’ve ever tasted.”

As for that wild coho salmon that puts the growl in Wolf? Well, you won’t find it in Tofino for much longer. It’s almost out of season.

Sure, many Vancouver restaurants serve salmon all winter long, but the best restaurants do not. And that is why Wolf in the Fog ranks among our province’s best.

Special to The Globe and Mail