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# THE GEORGIA *straight*

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20<sup>th</sup> annual  
**golden  
plates**

Nightingale's Phil Scarfone's passion for excellence has made him chef of the year; plus, readers' picks for the best food and drinks across Metro Vancouver



# Scarfone soars at Nightingale

The head chef at David Hawksworth's newest dining room succeeds with passion and by focusing on details

BY GAIL JOHNSON

Phil Scarfone's first restaurant job was not, as the story so often goes, the thing that made him dream of one day becoming a chef. In fact, the executive chef of Nightingale, the newest addition to the Hawksworth Restaurant Group, hated it.

He was 16 and spent eight months making sandwiches at a Tim Hortons in his hometown of Hamilton, Ontario. Afterward, he vowed he'd never work with food again.

A lot has happened in the 16 years since for Scarfone, who has been selected by readers as chef of the year in the *Georgia Straight's* Golden Plates Awards.

Sitting with Scarfone before lunch service recently on the second level of the spectacularly designed restaurant, adorned with golden origami-style birds seemingly in flight, it's clear that he has drive. Wearing jeans, non-slip chef's clogs, a dirty apron, and a Nightingale T-shirt that reveals his colourful right-arm tattoo sleeve—a pig's face here, a spot prawn there; some garlic, rosemary, Brussels sprouts, even sriracha, among other foods he loves—he speaks at a swift clip, explaining how he initially enrolled in a journalism program after high school. At the last

minute, he phoned his parents before the fall session to say he wanted to pursue culinary training instead.

He ended up getting hired to do dishes at an all-girls camp in the "middle of nowhere" in Maine. "It was a really old chef, and I showed up and said, 'I'm your pot washer,'" Scarfone recalls. "He was like, 'No. We can get anybody to wash pots. I need help in the kitchen.'" Did he ever: the elderly man and a skeleton crew of international students, few of whom spoke English, were tasked with making breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks daily for 200 hungry campers.

Two things stuck with Scarfone: how much he was enjoying himself and what his boss had to say about a culinary career. "I liked working with my hands," he says. "I learned a lot, and he [the head chef] was really enthusiastic. He taught me how to communicate in the kitchen, how to be cordial."

"I remember him saying, 'If you're good at this, you could have a job anywhere. You can see the world. It's fun, and you'll meet the best people. All the fun happens back here.'"

Scarfone started at Niagara College soon after. If that initial exposure to a cook's life was a gentle one, the training he got the following summer was not.

He worked at a renowned resort called Taboo Muskoka, where the head chef at the time ran the kitchen in the style of Gordon Ramsay. Although Scarfone had a year of culinary school under his belt, he didn't know that frozen chicken stock should never be thawed in hot water, a method that can result in the growth of harmful bacteria.

"I remember hearing him yell across the kitchen, 'Who the fuck did this?'" Scarfone came clean, but not before the chef took the block of stock, which had started to melt in the middle, and threw it into an empty sink. "Liquid shot up and hit the ceiling; it was all over everyone. He just yelled, 'Never, ever do that again! You could kill someone!'"

Even on days when he wasn't having major screwups, Scarfone felt out of his league.

"You come off your first year of culinary school thinking, 'Yeah! I know how to make a roux!' But I knew nothing," he says. "And I just got destroyed. I got broken down. I went into his office one day and said, 'I can't do this. I'm scared to come to work.' But, looking back, I can see what he was trying to do. He said, 'I wouldn't give you shit if I didn't think you have what it takes.'"

"And I was learning every time," he adds. "As I was learning, I was getting better and more organized."

After graduating, Scarfone worked at the Fairmont Banff Springs resort before a month-long stay at the U.K.'s three-Michelin-star rated Fat Duck restaurant. This involved everything from shucking 300 oysters a day (hands blistered as a result) to observing some of the world's top chefs in action.

"I got to hang out in the actual kitchen. You just wedge yourself in a corner and watch," he says. "I absorbed everything—how neat and tidy everyone was

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## READERS' CHOICES OF BEST...

### CHEF

1. PHIL SCARFONE (NIGHTINGALE)
2. Trevor Bird (Fable)
3. Ryan Reed (Nomad)

### NEW RESTAURANT

1. KISSA TANTO  
263 East Pender St.  
778-379-8078
2. Nightingale  
1017 West Hastings St.  
604-695-9500
3. Virtuous Pie  
583 Main St.  
604-620-0060

### NEIGHBOURHOOD FOR RESTAURANTS

1. GASTOWN
2. Kitsilano
3. Mount Pleasant

### BURNABY

1. THE PEAR TREE RESTAURANT  
4120 East Hastings St.  
604-299-2772
2. Anton's Pasta Bar  
4260 East Hastings St.  
604-299-6636
3. Hart House Restaurant  
6664 Deer Lake Ave.  
604-298-4278

### NORTH SHORE

1. CANYON  
3135 Edgemont Blvd.  
North Vancouver  
604-987-8812
2. BLVD Bistro  
636 Queensbury Ave.  
North Vancouver  
604-971-5559
3. Tomahawk  
1550 Philip Ave.  
North Vancouver. 604-988-2612

### RICHMOND

1. KIRIN  
7900 Westminster Hwy  
604-303-8833
2. Dinestry Dumpling House  
Various locations
3. Sun Sui Wah  
Seafood Restaurant  
102-4930 No. 3 Rd  
604-273-8208

### SURREY, DELTA, WHITE ROCK, LANGLEY

1. MY SHANTI  
15869 Croydon Dr., Surrey  
604-560-4416
2. Tasty Indian Bistro  
8295 120th St., Delta  
604-507-9393
3. Tap Restaurant  
101-15350 34 Ave., Surrey  
604-536-1954

### NEW WESTMINSTER, PORT MOODY, COQUITLAM, PORT COQUITLAM

1. THE BOATHOUSE RESTAURANT  
Various locations
2. Longtail Kitchen (tie)  
116-810 Quayside Dr.  
New Westminster. 604-553-3855
2. Wild Rice (tie)  
122-810 Quayside Dr.  
New Westminster  
778-397-0028
3. El Santo  
680 Columbia St.  
New Westminster  
604-553-1849

### BARTENDER

1. PHILIPPE C. GRANDBOIS (CHAMBAR)
2. Kevin Brownlee (AnnaLena)
3. Guy Stowell (Anh and Chi)

### SQUAMISH RESTAURANT

1. HOWE SOUND BREWING  
37801 Cleveland Ave.  
604-892-2603
2. Zephyr Café  
38084 Cleveland Ave.  
604-567-4568
3. The Salted Vine Kitchen + Bar  
37991 Second Ave.  
604-390-1910

### WHISTLER RESTAURANT

1. ARAXI RESTAURANT + OYSTER BAR  
110-4222 Village Square  
604-932-4540
2. Bearfoot Bistro  
4121 Village Green  
604-932-3433
3. Rimrock Cafe  
2117 Whistler Rd  
604-932-5565

## Scarfone soars

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and how organized it was.”

After going back to Taboo for a time, then working in Majorca, Spain, Scarfone returned to Canada, landing in Vancouver. He worked at db Bistrot Moderne, headed by internationally renowned New York chef Daniel Boulud, and then ORU Cuisine at the Fairmont Pacific Rim, before applying at Hawksworth Restaurant. When he was asked during his interview what station he would want there, his answer—“p.m. veg”—raised eyebrows.

“It’s the hardest station in the kitchen by far,” Scarfone says. “Usually, cooks want to be the meat guy or the fish guy. The meat guy passes the plate to me, and at Hawksworth there were probably five or six garnishes on every plate. So you have four pans going for one plate. Then you’d have a six-top [table of six] who ordered all different things. And we were busy. You fill up your flattop [stove] full of pans, and you’d have to prioritize and be the most organized. You have to talk to yourself for the whole service [all night]. I wanted them to know I was serious about the job, that I was willing to work through that.”

He proved himself, ultimately earning his first head-chef gig at Nightingale, which opened last year. Its concept is very different from that of Hawksworth, which showcases more upscale, detail-oriented cuisine. Scarfone makes changes to Nightingale’s menu regularly, depending on weekly fresh sheets, with a focus on what’s in season. He’s just as proud of the recipe his team developed for hand-pulled pizza dough (the pies being baked in a wood-fired oven) as he is of standouts like pork belly with shaved apple and house-made sauerkraut or yellowtail *crudo* accompanied by orange, scallion, and Fresno chili.

Other popular dishes include a bright apple salad with toasted walnuts, Szechuan pepper, and Avonlea cheddar cheese dressed with lemon vinaigrette, as well as shaved bison

tongue with carrot *escabeche*, celery root, and grilled bread. There’s crispy fried chicken with preserved-lemon yogurt, dill, and Espelette pepper—simple but addictive. The food—best shared—is delicious, not pretentious.

David Hawksworth says he chose Scarfone to lead the Nightingale kitchen because of his commitment to, and obvious passion for, his craft.

“He’s a hard worker, he listens really well, he has a great palate, and he’s dedicated, organized—all of the things you want in a chef,” Hawksworth says by phone. “He’s very reliable, and he’s really into working with great products. It’s been fantastic to see him start on the veg station and come all the way up—just fantastic.”

What Scarfone has found most challenging about switching from fine dining to more casual fare has been the restraint required in creating new dishes.

“It’s about peeling back the layers, figuring out what makes a dish tick, what makes it delicious, and knowing that what’s on the plate was just picked this morning or yesterday,” he says. “You have to be willing to tweak it or scrap it and start again. That’s the biggest thing—being humble.”

And although he doesn’t run his kitchen with the same rage as Ramsay, he is stern when he needs to be. (“If you burn the bone marrow, you get the Phil eyes,” he says. “That’s what they [the cooks] call it; I give them the dead eyes. We’ll have a chat in the back.”) Leading a team of almost 40 cooks and six dishwashers, he hopes to be as influential for his staff members as those chefs out east were for him so many years ago.

“I want all these guys to leave here feeling like they’ve accomplished something, like they’ve been a part of something and have taken responsibility for their work,” Scarfone says. “I want to run a kitchen with a culture that is friendly and professional and clean and that’s about the team. I want this to be a formative kitchen. I want to lead by example.” ♦

**hawksworth**  
**communications**

NIGHTINGALE  
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