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Top chef Hawksworth has a dream

by Gail Johnson

To watch something “like a hawk” may be a cliché, especially when the person watching is named David Hawksworth. But it’s exactly how the chef takes in what’s happening around him as he sits at the bar at Nightingale, his West Hastings Street restaurant, during an interview as the weekday lunch rush is starting to pick up speed.

Every time a dish floats by in a server’s hand, his head turns and his eyes dart right to it, holding a searing stare for as long as he can, ensuring it’s properly plated and prepared.

“I have a knack for looking at something from 35 feet away,” Hawksworth says. “I can tell if there isn’t Maldon sea salt on there or if a pasta looks undercooked. It’s a curse. It drives you insane.”

You’d have to have a certain dose of madness and perfectionism to reach the kind of success Hawksworth has had over the years.

Voted the 2019 Golden Plates chef of the year by readers, he owns an eponymous restaurant and catering company in addition to Bel Café and Nightingale, has a partnership with Air Canada creating dishes that are served in business class on international flights, and has made guest-chef appearances at the James Beard House and Cakebread Cellars in Napa Valley, among other places.

More recently, the Hawksworth Restaurant Group announced it will open a restaurant at Vancouver International Airport in 2020. Located past security, the 7,000-square-foot space will feature healthy fare, providing an alternative to the hub’s existing food choices, which Hawksworth describes as “shockingly bad”, a “1 out of 10”.

The married father of an 11-year-old son has other ideas for new ventures, cards he’s playing close to the chest for the time being. Although he has contemplated opening a second Nightingale location, that doesn’t seem likely anytime soon.

What’s got him most excited is the potential for an altogether different kind of project: Hawksworth’s own farm.

There’s nothing in writing and no details to share yet, but he will say it’s a dream and a goal to have a place to grow his own vegetables and fruit, to have access to the freshest seasonal ingredients possible, and that he’s exploring local options.

“It’s that much more meaningful when you’re growing your own stuff,” Hawksworth says. “We [he and his family] have a few things we grow in our backyard, and when you take that



David Hawksworth—voted the 2019 Golden Plates chef of the year by readers of the *Georgia Straight*—says his goal is to grow his own vegetables and fruit.

vegetable and go back to your kitchen, you pay a lot more attention to it than if you went to the store.

“If you pick an apple from the tree or have fresh eggs,” he says, “there’s nothing like it.”

A cookbook is also forthcoming. It will be a collection of recipes following the evolution of his career, from the decade he spent working in the U.K. at Michelin restaurants like Le Manoir aux Quat’Saisons, L’Escargot, and the Square to the current day. Sophisticated home cooks will finally be able to make the mosaic terrine he developed in London; other recipes will be simpler, in line with Nightingale’s vegetable-forward share plates and pizzas, and will include pastries and cocktails.

Although he employs 350 people in his operations, staffing is an ongoing struggle, as any local restaurateur can attest. Adding to the pressure of running a successful restaurant in Vancouver’s competitive market are high rents and pricey real estate.

“We don’t have affordable housing, and that’s tricky,” Hawksworth says. “Attracting great staff is always a challenge when Vancouver is so expensive and people are shy to come here.”

“Anybody can open a restaurant,” he adds. “Given enough money, you

can get the thing open. You’ve gotta keep that beast alive. Restaurants usually don’t get paid off for about 10 years. It’s hard watching other restaurants not make it.”

Hawksworth is especially proud of the Hawksworth Young Chef Scholarship Foundation. Its annual competition for aspiring culinary talents aged 28 and under receives as many as 300 applications each year. He started the scholarship out of frustration after seeing Canada get passed over, time and again, in awards like S. Pellegrino’s list of the world’s 50 best restaurants.

The Hawksworth scholarship recipient gets \$10,000 plus a stage at an international restaurant. This year, he’s taking all of the past winners to Italy for four days to explore wineries and restaurants—“to inspire them to see what’s out there”. The ultimate goal is to have those chefs come back home with the experience, enthusiasm, and professional skills required to help elevate the city’s and the country’s dining scene.

“We need to invigorate young cooks,” he says. “I want to see Canadian food be recognized. People should be travelling to Canada for the food.” **95**

READERS' CHOICES

NEW RESTAURANT

1. **THE VICTOR**
39 Smithe St., 604-683-7271
2. Di Beppe Ristorante
8 West Cordova St.
604-620-3800
3. Pepino's Spaghetti House
631 Commercial Dr.
604-254-5633

PACIFIC NORTHWEST

1. **NIGHTINGALE**
1017 West Hastings St.
604-695-9500
2. Bishop's
2183 West 4th Ave.
604-738-2025
3. Hawksworth Restaurant
801 West Georgia St.
604-673-7000

CONTINENTAL

1. **CHAMBAR RESTAURANT**
568 Beatty St.
604-879-7119
2. Tableau Bar Bistro
1181 Melville St.
604-639-8692
3. Bauhaus Restaurant
1 West Cordova St.
604-974-1147

FRENCH

1. **ST. LAWRENCE**
269 Powell St.
604-620-3800
2. Les Faux Bourgeois
663 East 15th Ave.
604-873-9733
3. L'Abattoir
217 Carrall St.
604-568-1701

GREEK

1. **STEPHO'S SOUVLAKI GREEK TAVERNA**
Various locations
2. The Greek by Anatoli
Various locations
3. Apollonia Greek Restaurant
1830 Fir St.
604-736-9559

ITALIAN

1. **ASK FOR LUIGI**
305 Alexander St.
604-428-2544
2. Savio Volpe
615 Kingsway
604-428-0072
3. Anton's Pasta Bar
4260 East Hastings St., Burnaby
604-299-6636

LATIN AMERICAN

1. **CUCHILLO**
261 Powell St., 604-559-7585
2. El Camino's
3250 Main St., 604-875-6246
3. Chicha, 136 East Broadway
604-620-3963

MEDITERRANEAN

1. **CIOPPINO'S MEDITERRANEAN GRILL & ENOTECA**
1133 Hamilton St., 604-688-7466
2. Nuba, various locations
3. Café Medina, 780 Richards St.
604-879-3114

MEXICAN

1. **TACOFINO**, various locations
2. La Taqueria, various locations
3. Las Margaritas Restaurante y Cantina
1999 West 4th Ave., 604-734-7117

SPANISH

1. **BODEGA ON MAIN**
1014 Main St., 604-565-8815
2. España
1118 Denman St., 604-558-4040
3. The Sardine Can
26 Powell St., 604-568-1350