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VANCOUVER SUN THURSDAY, AUGUST 7, 2025

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CHIC CUISINE

MIA STAINSBY

So, he’s showing off. What chef wouldn’t?

Chef Ryan Watson is super excited about the massive 15,000-square-foot on-site garden with a small orchard, an apiary, and a greenhouse big enough to house a couple of families.

All he has to do is wish for ingredients and a pair of horticulturalists make it happen.

“But I’d gladly help,” he says. “I have a gardening background.”

Watson is the executive chef at the year-old Naturally Pacific Resort in Campbell River, elevating the city’s allure and chic quotient by a lot. Travel and Leisure magazine included it in the 100 best new hotels of the year.

It’s owned by a family with deep roots in the community.

The Mailman family has been in the construction and development business for more than three decades, but this is their first hospitality venture, and they’ve poured love and pride into the hometown project.

Chef Watson oversees three restaurants at the resort. Carve Kitchen and Meatery, the flagship dining room, is elegant and art deco-lite in looks. Velocity Lounge is a casual sports lounge, adjacent to an 18-hole golf course, another Mailman family operation. It includes an eight-bay virtual driving range where, if you like, you can tee off at the famous St. Andrews Old Course.

In summer, the Sunset Terrace patio by the pool is a third option, offering barbecued food and salads. Down the road, there’ll be a conference centre at the resort with more mouths to feed.

But, back to that garden.

“It’s phenomenal,” Watson says of the green growing space. “I’ve worked in a lot of places with gardens with a little bit of this and that, often herbs.”

But nothing like this.

“Currently, we have 10 varieties of tomatoes, raspberries, varieties of peppers, sugar snap peas,” he said when I interviewed him. “Whatever’s not grown on our property, we can find between here and Duncan. For example, our kennebec potatoes are from Echo Valley Farms (in Qualicum).”

Hotel operations are second nature to him, having worked at the Banff Springs Hotel, Delta Marriott in Fredericton, Fairmont Hotel Macdonald in Edmonton, and Chateau Lake Louise. He has a solid cooking background and his know-how is evident.

Don’t let “carvery and meatery” in the restaurant name confuse you.

The menu is well-rounded with a lot of local sustainable seafood dishes. But yes, there are a few steaks and prime rib on Sundays.

Butchery is his “big passion,” Watson says.



Chef Ryan Watson, the executive chef at Naturally Pacific Resort in Campbell River, is understandably proud of its 15,000-square-foot on-site garden.

IF YOU GO

**Carve Kitchen and Meatery
at Naturally Pacific Resort**

Where: 700 Petersen Rd.,
Campbell River

When: Breakfast, lunch, daily;
brunch on Saturdays

“There’s minimal waste that way. Fat is turned into tallow for our whipped potatoes and brushed over every steak; trim from steaks is ground up for burgers. Nothing goes in the bin except silverskin,” he says.

And so it goes with vegetable scraps. The trim is used for pestos, soups or pickles.

Chicken bones and feet go into stock. Thus, there’s a soup du jour on the menu.

When I visited in late spring, our charismatic server announced the soup du jour was asparagus and

apple bisque. It was velvety and delicious.

For dinner, there’s a choice of à la carte or a \$63 three-course prix fixe menu, which changes up monthly.

A caesar salad on the prix fixe differed from the one on the à la carte. Whole heirloom baby gem romaine leaves stood in for torn romaine leaves and, instead of the usual croutons, a couple of toasted croissant slices, sourced from a local bakery. That bakery, Freyja, also supplies the burger buns and sourdough bread.

If visiting Campbell River, scribble a note to self and stop by this Scandinavian-style croissant shop. And for that matter, add Shelter Point Distillery; their delicious whiskies have won gold at the Canadian Whisky Awards, the San Francisco World Spirits Competition, and the World Whiskies Awards.

Back at Carve, my husband sliced into his thick, California-cut, eight-ounce striploin (the beef is all triple-A, from Alberta). “Mmmmm,” he sighed. It was juicy, grilled just right, and emphatically meaty.

“It plates nicer,” Watson says of the robust cut. It was served with asparagus and tomatoes from a few yards away, and local potatoes.

My buttermilk fried chicken, marinated in buttermilk and hot sauce, was moist and flavourful. It was jacketed in thick, crunchy batter with a hint of sweet from the addition of crushed Frosted Flakes.

“The sugar caramelizes when deep fried,” says Watson. The sweet crust didn’t work for me. A cornmeal crunch might have aligned with the accompanying polenta made creamy with local cheddar.

I didn’t try the onion rings but they sound decadently delicious.

Thick-cut rings are stuffed with duck confit, frozen, then battered and deep-fried and served with tomato jam and pickled veg. Perhaps another dish in that category is pork belly and scallop with stout demi-glace, corn purée, blackened corn salsa, blistered tomatoes and chicharron.

For dessert, the bestseller crème brûlée wasn’t too sweet (often it is, for me) and on point.

The wine list matches the kitchen’s ambitions with a wide variety of styles and price points. B.C. is well represented, including pours from Vancouver Island’s own 40 Knots and Alderlea wineries. There are also quality wines from France, Italy and other global producers.

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