

# The Daily Transcript

San Diego's Business Daily

Friday, June 18, 2004 | Vol. 119, No. 122

## The flavors of Old England in Canada

### Adventures in Dining and Travel

By David Rottenberg

Americans love Victoria, the capital city of the Canadian province of British Columbia — it breathes Old England in its charming and quaint Victorian houses, blooming flower gardens and heritage Tudor buildings.

Years ago, many people from England retired to Victoria, with its beautiful ocean views and temperate climate. When I first visited the city, the air was filled with many different characteristic English accents. Now, Victoria has matured into a bustling, enterprising city and a major tourist destination, with a diversity of residents. Nevertheless, the city has an aura of tradition.

Victoria is located on the north corner of Vancouver Island, a large landmass rich in natural beauty and resources. Visitors come to Vancouver Island to experience eco-tourism, whale watching, salmon fishing — a huge variety of recreational opportunities. Many just drive some 30 kilometers from Swartz Bay, where the ferry stops, to reach the majestic Inner Harbour, where the stately provincial capital buildings sit near the Fairmont Empress Hotel.

Victoria has some world-famous attractions, such as the gorgeous Butchart Gardens and the small but interesting Craigdarroch Castle. The area around the Inner Harbour, though, is the center of tourist activity. Restaurants and shops compete for attention from passersby. One can buy unique items like fine English china and Scottish woolens in the boutiques or just about anything desired in the large Hudson's Bay department store.

Horse-drawn carriages crowd cars on the narrow streets, pulled by draught horses that seem to know the route with hardly any human direction. The carriage drivers point out to their passengers the historic sites they pass, like the famous home of Emily Carr, an early feminist.

Most of all, the Inner Harbour is dominated by two structures, the legislative building and the Empress. Both were designed by the same architect, Francis Rattenbury, although built at different times. Both stand like strong castles, enduring and for-

midable. At night, the legislative building is illuminated by thousands of small lights, giving the building a Disneyland like appearance.

Nothing represents the spirit of Victoria to me as does The Empress, standing majestically. The Fairmont Empress Hotel, named after Queen Victoria when she was Empress of India, was built by the Canadian Pacific Railway and opened its doors in 1908. The railway bought the Princess hotel chain and also a controlling interest in the Fairmont hotel chain during the 1990s, to create Fairmont Hotels, the largest luxury hotel management company in North America.

The Empress underwent a major renovation to restore and preserve its original appearance and grandeur. Photographs and drawings were carefully studied to re-create the traditional look and feel of the property while bringing in modern comforts and amenities. It is like having the best of both worlds. My guestroom, which overlooked the beautiful Inner Harbour, was large and well appointed.

The Empress even offers Fairmont Gold, a hotel within a hotel, with special rooms designated for their convenience and beauty. Fairmont Gold also features its own concierge staff and lounge, with day-long service of food, drinks and an "honor bar" of fine liquor.

There are a number of dining opportunities at the Empress, but two stand out most notably — fine dining in the Empress Dining Room, and the afternoon high tea. Royalty has eaten at the Empress Dining Room, as well as famous movie stars, authors and political figures.

The kitchen at the Empress Dining Room is run by Rob Cleland and his staff. Cleland trained in Vancouver and worked most of his career in Canada but has absorbed a global approach to his culinary thinking, with primary focus on using fresh, local ingredients. His favorite direction to his staff is, "Keep it simple. Classic cuisine is about enhancing the natural flavors of foods."

The "front of the house" is run by Robin Bourne, a witty manager that supervises service with a skilled hand and great knowledge about food-wine pairings.

During dinner, a harpist plays soothing melodies.

The meal began with a Cesar's salad, expertly mixed and tossed



Guests partake in High Tea at the Empress, an English tradition dating back to the 16th century.

tableside. It is a real show. The server used real anchovies, not paste, but ground them into a paste. He added Dijon mustard and tabasco to sharpen the flavors.

Prior to serving, he sprinkled pepper directly onto our plates. The result was delightful.

My prime rib could not have been better — an end cut teeming with spices and flavor. It came with traditional Yorkshire pudding — hard to find in San Diego restaurants. The pairing with excellent Australian pinot noir was superb. The dessert, fresh sweet strawberries topped with Grand Marnier, was perfect.

Royalty could not have dined better.

High Tea is an English tradition that hails back to the Duchess of Bedford in the 16th century, who used to feel faint in the afternoons and began to drink tea with small cakes to restore herself. It was soon adopted by society as the "thing to do." High Tea at the Empress is definitely the thing to do.

The main room is exquisite, overlooking the Inner Harbour. Specially designed fine china first created for King George V are used. The server brings a three-tiered tray that contains finger sandwiches on the bottom, scones in the middle and sweet pastries on top. The tea is specially blended for the service, using teas from all over the old British Empire.

One can practically taste the tradition. This is so popular a daily event that more than 115,000 customers are served annually.

Victoria is a charming destination that is certain to please. Staying at the Fairmont Empress will definitely be a memorable experience, whether for vacation, honeymoon or convention at the nearby grand Victoria Conference Center.

*Rottenberg is editor of Dining San Diego Magazine and member of the California Restaurant Writers Association.*

Source Code: 20040617tbh