

The Daily Transcript

San Diego's Business Daily

Friday, January 14, 2005 | Vol. 120, No. 10

Vancouver's dining scene looks a lot like home

Dining San Diego

By David Rottenberg

San Diego has a sister city. It may not be designated so officially, but the two cities seem destined to follow a common path and develop a similar look.

San Diego and Vancouver, British Columbia, share a similar topography. Vancouver is located about 120 miles north of Seattle, just past the Canadian border. Both cities press up against the ocean. Both have temperate weather. Both are laboring under an influx of new residents. Both have a diverse ethnic population. Both have downtown cores in which expensive high-rise condos are popping up like mushrooms. Both have created vertical, high-density living conditions in which residents are shoehorned into limited space.

The similarity does not end there. It turns out that some of the same developers are operating in both cities, giving them both a common architectural face and style. It's almost as if Vancouver buildings are being cloned and transplanted in San Diego.

And both have seen an explosion of new restaurants for people who would rather walk to a nearby eatery than face the challenge of cooking in small kitchens. Like San Diego, Vancouver is filled with wonderful places to dine. Many of them are single unit operations run by a resident chef who emphasizes creativity in preparation and presentation.

Vancouver has become a popular destination for San Diegans, who stop by on the way to an Alaskan cruise or a Whistler skiing holiday. The city has much to offer for an extended visit — luxury hotels and spas, incredible shopping and fascinating cultural attractions. It also offers world class dining.

The Asian influence on cuisine is strong. Chinese restaurants are everywhere, to service the large Chinese population. Japanese

influence is most notable at Tojo's, a world-famous sushi restaurant.

European influences are still strong. French, German and Italian restaurants are among the most famous and popular. Robert Feenie has won recognition from *Relais & Chateaux* for excellent French cuisine in his storefront neighborhood location. But elegant, cosmopolitan French cuisine is best found at *Fleuri* (800-961-7555), a fine dining restaurant located in the Five Diamond award-winning hotel, Sutton Place.

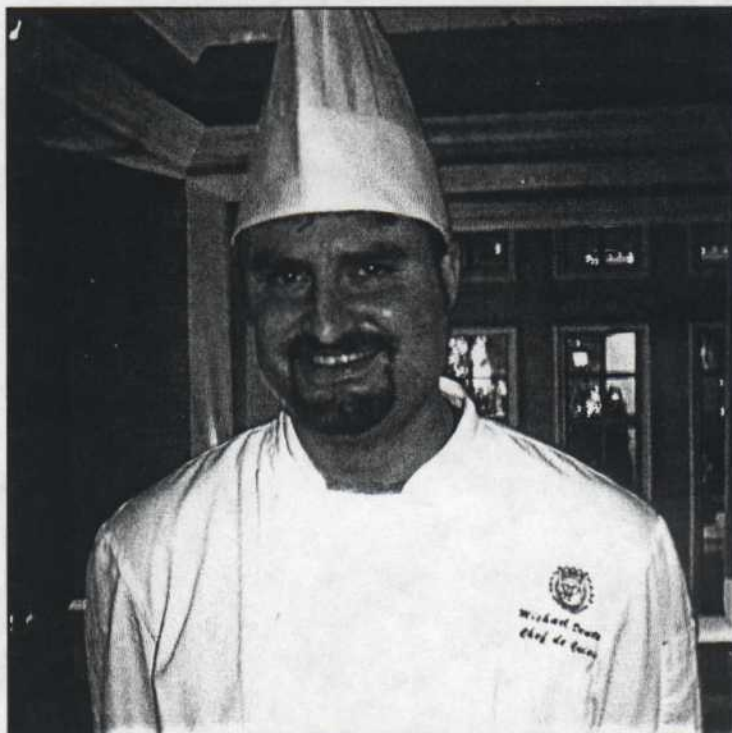
The ambiance is elegant and classically traditional. The cuisine, under the guidance of Chef Michael Deutsch, is superb. Deutsch grew up and trained in British Columbia but has traveled through western Europe and has worked with some of the best chefs on the continent. His dishes look as good as they taste. Sablefish filet, a sweet, succulent fish, was brought on a bed of personally handcrafted garlic gnocchi whose flavors were enhanced by a pear tomato basil ragout.

German (more Swiss, really) cuisine is wonderfully represented by the *William Tell Restaurant* (604-688-3504), a fixture on the city's restaurant scene. Owner Erwin Doebelli has "worked the room" for over 40 years, greeting his "power guests," entertaining with marvelous stories and preparing flambé desserts tableside.

In the true traditions of Swiss hospitality, the space is exceptionally comfortable and service is elegant. The menu includes a fragrant and cheesy fondue Vaudoise, superb bisque and an array of duck, veal and seafood dishes — all beautifully prepared and presented. The best dessert is the one created by Doebelli at your table.

After such an illustrious career, Doebelli has turned over operations to his son, Phillipe Doebelli, a highly trained sommelier who appears more than capable of taking over.

Italian influences in Vancouver are visible in the ethnic neighborhood on lower Commercial Drive,



Chef Michael Deutsch from *Fleuri* at the Sutton Place Hotel, Vancouver

where Italian restaurants, coffee shops and delis stand side by side. But some of the best Italian cuisine is found in eateries created by Umberto Menghi.

Menghi came to Vancouver as a young man and built his career along with the city's growth. He owns five restaurants in the Vancouver-Whistler area that have received high acclaim for Tuscan cuisine. His cookbooks have become best sellers. Menghi also created *Villa Delia* in the Tuscany region of Italy, where he conducts an ongoing cooking school. Attendees learn to prepare amazing dishes and have the chance to sample the life, food, wine and olive oil of the region.

My favorite Menghi restaurant is *Il Giardino* (604-669-2422), "the garden." It is located in a converted home and patio on the edge of downtown. On a balmy summer day, dining on the patio is a superb experience. The interiors have high ceilings, lots of wood and flowering plants everywhere.

The appetizer, baked brie in filo, with dried fruit chutney, is a superb introduction to the meal. There is a tempting list of pastas and risottos on the menu. Tagliolini with fresh lobster is a meal unto itself. The linguini with fresh seafood blends a simple but excellently prepared pasta with the bounty of local waters. Osso Buco Milanese is tender and tasty. Game diners will enjoy the roasted reindeer loin. My favorite dessert is the *Lemoncello Lemon Tart*, for its lightness and taste.

San Diego has a sister city in Vancouver in the spirit of innovative cuisine that is finding new and better tastes by creating new combinations of old favorite ideas with fresh, local foods. San Diegans who visit Vancouver will feel immediately at home.

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

Source Code: 20050113tbi