

## **Naked pasta that takes your breath away**

**Chef Neil Taylor, who shares his culinary roots with Jamie Oliver, does astounding things with simple, fresh ingredients**

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Crab tagliarini with chili and garlic. It sounds like such a simple dish - light, fresh, not too fussy. Something you could easily prepare at home.

Ha. Don't be fooled. In the hands of Neil Taylor, the newly imported executive chef at the recently opened Cibo Trattoria in the Moda Hotel, this humble pasta explodes into a multidimensional jaw-dropper.

The first bite is a bracingly pungent burst of parsley that has been heaped on by the fistful, thrusting this often-derided supporting garnish to centre stage. Wow, what an entrance.

But then the herbaceous torrent suddenly mellows under a sweet flow of softly sautéed red and orange peppers and a briny splash of tangled crab meat.

Just when I think the fireworks have tapered off and I can safely pause to savour the tender homemade noodles melting on my tongue, a wallop of hot chili and garlic sneaks up from behind to smack me in the back of the throat.

I am rendered breathless. Never - well, at least not since the days of Bis Moreno or my last trip to Zambri's in Victoria - has a local plate of pasta tasted this good.

What's even more amazing is how Mr. Taylor has quietly slipped into Vancouver without any fanfare. His name might not carry the same cachet as Daniel Boulud, Jean-Georges Vongerichten or Warren Geraghty, but he does hail from one of the most famous restaurants in London, the legendary River Café, where he spent seven years working his way up from commis chef to senior chef de partie.

The River Café is often cited as the place where Jamie Oliver, a.k.a. the Naked Chef, was discovered. But this culinary landmark is more significantly known as the Chez Panisse of England. Founders Ruth Rogers and Rose Gray, the British equivalents of Alice Waters, have long championed the beauty of simple dishes made with extremely fresh, seasonal ingredients.

So what does Mr. Taylor have to teach us about cooking locally?

First, it pays to do your homework. The 27-year-old chef arrived early, at least two months before Cibo opened its doors in mid-July, to visit the markets, meet with suppliers, taste the products and test the proverbial waters.

Second, unstinting standards sometimes require a daring kitchen reshuffle. The only thing Cibo stores in its freezer is ice cream. Every item on the contemporary Italian menu is same-day fresh.

Third, some of the best basic ingredients are found elsewhere. Mr. Taylor imports his flour from Italy and sampled 30 different olive oils before deciding on Frantoia, a viscous, full-bodied extra virgin olive oil from Sicily.

And how does it all play out on the palate? Fabulously.

Deep-fried Zucchini flowers (\$15), so delicate they have to be picked at night, are crunchy, creamy and luscious. Mr. Taylor adds an extra layer of texture by keeping the long stems attached. And he blends the ricotta with whispers of anchovy and lemon zest, which gives the cheese just enough acidity to prevent it from tasting too heavy. I gorged on these stuffed courgette blossoms while in Tuscany last month. Mr. Taylor's are, hands down, the best I've ever tried.

The pasta dishes are excellent, thanks in no small part to Mark Perrier, former executive chef at CinCin Ristorante, who makes the dough from scratch each morning.

In addition to the show-stopping crab tagliarini (\$20), we ordered some heavenly agnolotti (\$19). The paper-thin parcels were wrapped around soft bundles of loosely minced pork from Sloping Hill Farm, fragrantly lashed with fennel and oregano. The dish was perfectly adorned with thick shaves of parmesan and a rich dash of 12-year-old balsamic vinegar.

Halibut (\$24) was a gorgeous contrast of silky flesh and golden crust, served with wilted spinach and a chunky olive sauce that was hot, slippery and flecked with capers.

And the grilled Berkshire pork chop (\$30)? Superb. It would be a shame to mess too much with meat this fatty and flavourful. Mr. Taylor just gives it a nice, crispy char and heaps the plate high with juicy morels and snappy fava beans cooked in a light broth.

We washed it all down with a spicy, crisply balanced pelaverga from Piedmont, selected from a long Italian wine list full of surprises that head of operations Sebastien Le Goff carefully crafted.

Though we barely had room for dessert, we couldn't resist the ripe raspberries (\$8) served with a lemony cr me de mascarpone. As delicious as the berries were, I definitely want to go back to try the River Caf e's famous chocolate

Nemesis. (If you search online you'll find dozens of stories about how the recipe for this deceptively simple, ultra-rich dessert has vexed legions of home chefs around the globe.)

I can't wait to return.

The dining room, with its plain wooden tables and black-and-white walls, may not be much to look at. And the prices aren't cheap, considering that the pasta portions are appetizer-sized.

But the food - classic Italian cooking, simply prepared and presented, made with the highest quality ingredients to be found here or at the source - is worth every penny.

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