

A Progressive Beer Dinner

BY DON TSE

We live in a city with too many great restaurants. It seems that almost every week I drive by an old favourite and lament that I haven't been there in ages. The problem is, I have been too busy visiting new great restaurants.

What a problem! Still, it bothers me that there are so many restaurants I just don't seem to have time to visit. Then, I started wondering if there was an unwritten rule that said a person must have a meal in only one restaurant per evening. Of course there isn't. Thus, I found a solution to the too-many-great-restaurants "problem": a progressive restaurant dinner.

A progressive dinner is one where each course is consumed at a different location. I was first introduced to the idea as a form of long, drawn-out potluck. A few friends and I met at the first host's house for appetizers, after which we all travelled to the next house for the next dinner course, and so on, until we reached the last house for dessert.

As a big and fussy eater, I found the whole thing to be tortuous. I got progressively hungrier travelling from house to house. And since the courses were usually prepared beforehand, the hot got cold, the cold got warm, the crisp soggy and the moist dry. After a couple of these outings, I had the brilliant idea (if I do say so myself) of bringing the progressive dinner to the professional arena, and as a beer connoisseur, making it a progressive beer dinner.

This progressive dinner was a perfect means of

trying three restaurants and three different beers while learning about food and beer pairings. The restaurants are located within one city block on the Stephen Avenue Mall downtown, making the chronological and geographic distance between them easily manageable.

My evening began at **CATCH OYSTER BAR** (100 – 8th Avenue S.E.). The main floor oyster bar offers eight different types of oysters, four from each coast. These oysters, alone or in any combination, served as the evening's appetizer paired with stout beer.

The combination of stout and oysters works best with a dry, Irish-style stout which, in fact, is the only stout served at Catch. The light tartness of Irish-style stout can accompany a touch of lemon on the oyster, while the gentle roasted flavour of the stout will not argue with a drop of Tabasco. Big Rock Brewery's **McNally's Reserve**, has a light, clean sourness. Because it is made locally and therefore served fresh, it often tastes superior to its main rival, Guinness. When pairing oysters elsewhere or at home, avoid oatmeal stout, the sweetness of which will not accompany the savoury character of oysters as perfectly as Irish-style stout does.

After the appetizers, the main course of the evening was enjoyed at **TEATRO** (200 – 8th Avenue S.E.), just one block east. Here, the saffron risotto with seafood (\$28) was beautifully paired with **Hoegaarden**, the classic Belgian wit (white) beer. Teatro's risotto is a delicately flavoured dish and tastes best when accompanied by a subtle-tasting beer like Belgian white beer, which is brewed with unmalted wheat. Brewing with unmalted wheat has the enigmatic effect of giving this beer a pleasant "mouthfeel" without adding malty sweetness. The result is a beer that is drier, yet fuller, than German wheat beers brewed with malted wheat. And because wheat is a huskless grain, wit beer is always clean tasting, with no tannins. In the case of Hoegaarden, 45 percent of the grain used is



Illustration by Darcy Muenchrath

unmalted wheat, resulting in a beer that displays a slight lemon acidity and a gentle clove bitterness to provide complexity.

But what makes a beer like this a particularly great accompaniment to risotto is its high level of carbonation, which effectively "scrubs" the palate of the cheese and fats. Fats coat the mouth and fatigue the palate, but a gentle scrubbing from a highly-carbonated beverage will renew the palate and allow each mouthful of risotto to be appreciated with invigorated taste buds. The clove bitterness, a contrasting flavour to the risotto, also helps accentuate the richness of this dish.

If you're ever having risotto and Hoegaarden, or another Belgian *wit* beer, is not available, try a dry, premium German pilsner instead. The combination will not be quite as successful as it is with the *wit* beer, but a similarly high level of carbonation and gentle bitterness will achieve similar results.

Once the risotto was finished and the palate given a final cleansing with the last drops of Hoegaarden, it was time to head across the street to

CENTINI RESTAURANT AND

LOUNGE (160 – 8th Avenue S.E.) for dessert. Here, chef Fabio Centini oversees the creation of fantastic desserts. While the pairing of beer and dessert seems odd to most, it can be a great combination when

done correctly. The key is to ensure that the beer is sweeter than the accompanying dessert. Otherwise, the sweetness of the dessert will mask any sweetness in the beer and the beer will taste excessively bitter.

Centini offers **Pawel Kwak**, brewed by Belgium's Bosteels Brewery, which is presented in a unique glass made specifically for this beer. This glass features a bulbous bottom and its own wooden stirrup to keep it upright. Legend says that the beer was originally favoured by the drivers of horse-drawn coaches and that the glass was designed to be held in a stirrup as the driver tended to his horses. This glass was reason in itself to order the beer, but for the purposes of our dinner, Kwak's thickness and syrupy texture were the reasons we ordered it. Kwak is sweet with hints of caramelized sugar that allow it to stand up against Centini's Grand Marnier crème brûlée (\$12). As a bonus, the various colours of the beer, which range from rich amber to pale gold, pair visually with the brûlée of the dessert.

Any evening that ends with dessert at Centini is an evening in which great progress has been made. **cp**

Don Tse is a Calgary beer writer who loves good beer and good food, and believes both are better when paired with each other.