



P.J. Billington's sunroom. — Photo by Karl Wells/Special to The Telegram

Sumptuous dining in P.J.'s sunroom

Great food does not have to be complicated



Dining Out
Karl Wells

P.J. Billington's
Ramada Hotel
102 Kenmount Rd.
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The deft hand of Eugene Mueller is at work either figuratively or literally at P.J. Billington's at the Ramada.

Mueller, originally from Switzerland, has been cheffing in Newfoundland for many years. At one time he was top chef at Hotel Newfoundland.

Mueller's ability and experience were very much in evidence last week when companion and I dined at a booth in P.J. Billington's sunroom.

The restaurant looks pretty much as it has for years. I can't remember eating anywhere but the sunroom. The bar is dark — dark wood, dimly lit. I prefer the more cheerful atmosphere of the bright sunroom. Roof beams, as well as colourful stained-glass panels hung in the windows, create a pleasant dappled light. It's the perfect atmosphere in which to enjoy a rich, satisfying glass of wine and a meal.

P.J. Billington's, being a hotel restaurant, is open day and night serving breakfast, lunch and dinner. It has a general menu with lots of variety, but doesn't stray too far from convention. You won't find anything too palate-challenging on the menu.

There are the usual starters, soups and salads. But you'll also find

"gourmet salads" featuring ingredients like maple salmon, scallops and steak. A good menu selection of sandwiches and wraps highlights items like crispy chicken caesar burger, oven-roasted quesadillas or Louisiana (the chicken is blackened) club wrap.

Tempting

Plenty of seafood dishes, including one seafood pasta entrée, sound tempting. But meat eaters will be more than satisfied with P.J. Billington's menu.

Chicken, ribs and beef abound — be it solo cuts, in stir-fry or on flatbread pizza. With the exception of four selections from France and Italy, P.J. Billington's wines come from the New World. House wines are North or South American.

Our starters were humble, but the skill of the chef can be obvious in simple dishes as well as complex ones. Take pea soup. P.J. Billington's had been carefully made, not rushed, to make sure the correct consistency was achieved. It contained tender (not mushy) root vegetables, as well as small pieces of salt meat for a truly Newfoundland flavour.

Great food does not have to be complicated. I feasted on a plateful of the tastiest, freshest bruschetta in the city. Pieces of fresh baguette had been grilled or broiled, buttered and topped with marinated fresh tomato and herbs. Crowning this summer garden freshness was a layer of melted mozzarella. It was simply delicious.

Mains

P.J.'s signature ocean pearl fettuccine actually looked better than the picture on the menu. A mound of perfectly al dente fettuccine was topped



P.J.'s Surf and turf.
— Photo by Karl Wells/Special to The Telegram



P.J.'s traditional pea soup.
— Photo by Karl Wells/Special to The Telegram



P.J.'s signature ocean pearl fettuccine.
— Photo by Karl Wells/Special to The Telegram

with moist, tender ocean scallops and large shrimp luxuriating in a smooth, creamy, pink tomato sauce. Ringing the edge was a chain of blue mussels, all anointed with the same

pink sauce. It was an excellent, supremely flavourful dish.

The pasta was accompanied by a Greek salad, again a simple affair but made special by the wonderful freshness and quality of the ingredients: crispy, clean lettuce, crunchy cucumber, red, ripe tomatoes, feta, etc. It was such a pleasure having something so well made.

P.J. Billington's surf and turf was exactly what a good S&T should be: quality beef served with a comparable amount of good, fresh seafood cooked with skill. The eight-ounce striploin, ordered medium rare, came exactly as requested. The bacon wrapped scallops were not overcooked, nor were the skewered shrimp. Seafood and beef tasted richly of the sea and the land.

As for the vegetables, the baked potato, grilled peppers and grilled corn on the cob were delicious.

Not homemade

We skipped dessert after this fine repast, mainly because we were very full. However, I may have pushed myself, had at least one of the sweets actually been prepared at P.J. Billington's. Unfortunately, all were made outside and appeared to be the ubiquitous mass-produced products offered at many St. John's restaurants these days. Nonetheless, we did enjoy ourselves thoroughly at P.J. Billington's at the Ramada.

By the way, for all Bob MacDonal fans, the velvet-voiced singer will be back on deck at P.J. Billington's for his usual Saturday evening gig (vocalizing and playing guitar as you dine) later this month. In my humble opinion, it's one of the best nights out you can treat yourself to, especially for a special occasion.

Rating:

Price:
Meal for two with wine, tax and tip: \$100 (approximately)

Best Points:
Great affordable food

Areas for Improvement
Add some house-made desserts

Sound level:
Moderate

Wheelchair Access:
Yes

* Fair ** Good *** Excellent
**** Exceptional

Karl's Notebook Chinched Bistro

Yet another bistro has opened in downtown St. John's at 7 Queen St. It's called Chinched Bistro — I'm guessing in reference to the chinched-in, narrow attached building on Queen Street that was "7 ... a restaurant."

The new owners are chef spouses, Shaun Hussey and Michelle LeBlanc. I've mentioned the couple in previous columns as they both worked on Fogo Island. Shaun was chef at Nicole's Restaurant in Joe Batt's Arm and Michelle worked as a food consultant for Shorefast Foundation, a not-for-profit organization that is focused on creating economic development on Fogo Island through tourism and Fogo cuisine.

Hussey and LeBlanc are seriously good cooks, so I'm expecting the fare at Chinched Bistro to be on par with some of the finest restaurants in the city. Best of luck to them in their new venture.

Karl Wells is an accredited personal chef and recipient of the Canadian Culinary Federation Sandy Sanderson Award for Communications. Contact him through his website, www.karlwells.com.

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