#PHOTOESSAY

COCKTAIL PARTY:

SEEKING OUT CRAFTED DRINKS, SHARED PLATES & DELISH SNACKS IN FESTIVAL CITY

PREAMBLE & PHOTOS BY CHRIS TIESSEN

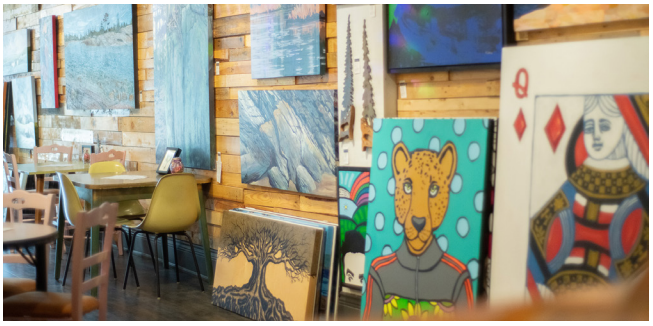
THE STRATFORD FOOD SCENE HAS ALWAYS STOOD OUT FOR US. TO BE SURE, THE RESTAURANTS OF FESTIVAL CITY ARE AMONG THE FINEST IN THE REGION – AND BEYOND. FOR LUNCHES. DINNERS. AND PROBABLY BREAKFASTS TOO (ALTHOUGH EARLY IN THE DAY THE TOQUE TEAM IS MORE OF A 'COFFEE AND RUN' CREW AND SO, AS A RESULT, HAS LITTLE FIRST-HAND EXPERIENCE OF DISTINCTIVE MORNING FEEDS).

WE HAVE ENJOYED A NUMBER OF OUR MOST MEMORABLE MEALS IN STRATFORD. DINNERS AT LOVAGE AND ELIZABETH, FOR INSTANCE – TWO RESTAURANTS THAT RANK AMONG OUR ALL-TIME FAVES. SOPHISTICATED PUB GRUB AT MERCER HALL. A COSMOPOLITAN EVENING AT THE BRUCE – REPLETE WITH WHISKIES PAIRED WITH EACH COURSE. A MEMORABLE MULTI-COURSE LIVE-FIRE FEAST AT THE SOUTH-AFRICAN INSPIRED BRAAI HOUSE. AND MORE CASUAL AFFAIRS AT AO PASTA AND PRETTY GOOD PIZZA – TWO LEGENDARY JOINTS THAT ARE NOW (REGRETTABLY) CLOSED.

MEALTIME IS CERTAINLY A GOOD TIME IN STRATFORD. BUT WHAT ABOUT OPTIONS FOR FOOD AND DRINK DURING THOSE 'IN-BETWEEN' MOMENTS? LIKE PRE-DINNER COCKTAILS, FOR INSTANCE. AND AFTER-THEATRE SNACKS. AND LATE-NIGHT SHARED PLATES? TO EXPLORE FESTIVAL CITY'S 'IN BETWEEN' CULINARY SPOTS, THE TOQUE TEAM CRUISED INTO TOWN ONE FRIDAY AFTERNOON IN OCTOBER TO ENJOY A VISIT AT A FEW OF THEM.

OUR WORTHY DESTINATIONS INCLUDED MATILDA ART BAR FOR STIFF GROG, FINE ART, AND DUCK FAT POPCORN; BRCH & WYN FOR CURATED COCKTAILS AND DELECTABLE SHARED PLATES; THE RELIC LOBBY BAR FOR NOSTALGIC VIBES AND UNIQUELY CRAFTED DRINKS (CHECK OUT THIS ISSUE'S 'COCKTAIL HOUR' FOR A CLEAR WINNER); BLUEBIRD FOR BISTRO-INSPIRED APPS AND THE MOST WONDERFUL NEGRONI SOURS; THE STARLIGHT FOR PICKLED EGGS, DREAMY SLIDERS, AND HOUSE-CANNED SPRITZ; LOVAGE FOR THE BEST SMALL PLATES THIS SIDE OF THE ROCKIES; AND A SECRET SPEAKEASY (OPEN FRIDAY AND SATURDAY NIGHTS) THAT'S WELL WORTH THE CHALLENGE OF ENTRY.

THE NEXT TIME YOU'RE FEELING PECKISH IN FESTIVAL CITY, BE SURE TO GIVE ANY OF THESE TERRIFIC JOINTS A GO. UNTIL THEN, LIVE VICARIOUSLY THROUGH THIS DROOL-INDUCING SPREAD.



12:21PM – Our tour of some of Stratford's best spots for cocktails and shared plates begins at Matilda Gallery & Art Bar, located beside the Avon Theatre on Downie Street. Cai and I take our time perusing the overflowing gallery (featuring Canadian painters and sculptors and more) before finding a comfortable couch near the front of the eclectic space for our first round: a 'Collingwood Old Fashioned' (whiskey, cardamon syrup, lemon rim, smokey rosemary) for me and a 'Vodka Soda' for Cai. Oh, and a lovely bowl of duck fat popcorn too.

1:10PM – Once we've finished our drinks, we drive over to Ontario St and 'check in' (virtually) to our Airbnb at the Perth Apartments. This modern two-bedroom accommodation is run by serial Stratford entrepreneur Bruce Whitaker and is located above Bruce's fantastic Perth County Inn and Festival's City's pre-eminent cocktail mecca, The Relic Bar. We'll be cozying up to this watering hole later today.

1:45PM – After dropping bags at our sweet digs, Cai and I walk the short distance to Brch & Wyn, our favourite Stratford café and wine bar. This precious subterranean joint – located underneath The Bradshaw Lofts (245 Downie) – offers up exquisite shareable menu items and the most imaginative (and tasty) cocktails. When we arrive, Brch & Wyn owner Jonny Kirwin pampers us with orders of 'Smashed Cucumber' (grapefruit, sesame, burnt onion, ponzu), 'Tomato' (sourdough, arugula, confit garlic), and 'Pork Belly' (kimchi, apple slaw, gojuchang, prawn cracker). And to drink: a 'Flower Power' (melon soda, fresh mint, boba pearl, lime leaf & dandelion-infused gin, elderflower liquor) and 'The Amaro-cano (infused coffee bourbon w hazelnut star anise & orange peel, averno amaro & ten year sercial madeira). We love everything about Brch & Wyn: the chill ambiance, subtle pink-forward design palette – and Jonny, of course. A must-visit.

4:22PM – We leave Brch & Wyn and beeline to Ontario Street where we window shop at some of our favourite boutiques: Werk-Shop (for Herschel gear), Small-Mart (for hard-to-find candies), Ande (for ethereal fashion items), Wills + Prior (for lifestyle gems), La Osa (for vintage finds), Bradshaw's (for Le Creuset porn) and more. Once we've worked up a thirst, we pop into The Relic Lobby Bar – a Hemingway-inspired cocktail bar that's located directly underneath our Airbnb. There's so much to love about this place: the long bar, antique details, romantic atmosphere. We revel in a 'Smoked Old Fashioned' (bourbon, sugar cane syrup, angostura aromatic & organge bitters, hickory smoke) and 'Dirty Negroni' (gin, sweet vermouth, campari, olive brine), and nibble on warm olives.

5:01PM – From Relic we meander (almost) next door to the delightful Blue Bird Restaurant + Bar for more cocktails and shareables. To eat: the undeniably delicious 'Ham & Cheese Croquettes' (mustard seeds & sharp cheddaro) and a scrumptious order of 'French Fries & Malty Mayo'. To drink: a uniquely tasty 'Negroni Sour' (campari, gin, sweet vermouth, lemon juice, egg white) for me and, for Cai, a 'Bluebird Gin & Tonic) 'gin, pink peppercorns, lime, fresh rosemary & tonic).

6:11PM – We're filling up, but the adventure continues. Our next stop: The Starlight – a cozy snack bar located along Wellington St that everyone (and we mean everyone) in Stratford is talking about. The vibe of this place is pure TOQUE: warm, relaxed, with a cozy chic ambiance. (Peep the floating 'buttresses' that effortlessly divide the space.) Starlight co-owner Megan Jones helps us choose some favourites from the enticing menu: 'Ginger Hoisin Wings' (crispy wings, sticky sauce, sesame, green onion), 'Arancini' (rice croquettes, parmigiano, mozzarella, tomato sauce), and the truly memorable 'Starlight Mini Mac' (beef patties, cheddar, onion, pickle, special sauce, slider bun) and 'Warm Carrot Salad' (lemon tahini dressing, heirloom carrots, Brussels sprouts, hot honey chili crisp). To drink, Cai grabs a cold non-alc brew while I fall in love with the in-house spritz – canned and cracked on-site.

cai note: I added non-alc, ok? Also, I'm 90% sure she said spritz was canned off-site by a brewery...I just don't remember which

7:42PM – We're stuffed. Filled to the brim. Can hardly move. Yet there's no way that an evening in Stratford is complete without a visit to Lovage – perhaps Festival City's crown jewel of food spots. Minimal. Unpretentious. Seemingly inimitable. We keep things light, with orders of the mind-blowing 'Delicata Squash' (stracciatella, chili crisp, sage) and 'Scallop Tiradito' (sweet corn, apricot, aji Amarillo). To pair: an 'Italian Gentleman' (bourbon, campari, lemon) for me and a 'Brooklyn' (rye, Montenegro, dry vermouth, maraschino) for Cai. Chef's kiss. Again and again.

8:58PM – It's time to head back to our pad at the Perth Apartments. On the way, though, Cai and I decide to search for a speakeasy that we've heard murmurs about. And so, after some sleuthing, we find ourselves in front of a non-descript entrance, fumble about until we solve the clever password to entry and are guided into a windowless room with prohibition era vibes. Big band music. Velvet-covered wingback chairs. Tuxedoed bartenders. And exquisite drinks. I'd love to tell you more, but I'm sworn to secrecy. Seek it out.