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## Chilling out in perfectly urban style

By Andrew Morrison  
May 17 2007

I admit that I had very low expectations for Chill Winston, not least because none of the talk I'd heard about the popular Gastown spot, which opened late last summer, had been consistent. Some told me it was not very good; others assured me, in rhapsodic terms, of its awesomeness.



PHOTO: DOUG SHANKS

Brad Ford, sous chef at Chill Winston, with the Gastown eatery's dish of wild sockeye salmon and house-made gravlax.

Until recently, the only things I knew for certain about it — other than that it occupied the same building that once housed the Greek restaurant Characters and the R.J Clark cigar store — had all been gleaned from the local media's talking points. I knew, for example, that its name comes from a British slang term for weed (as used repeatedly in the film Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels) and that it has a unisex bathroom reminiscent of the ones on Ally McBeal. Neither of these revelations had convinced me that I needed to visit Chill Winston in a hurry, so other than popping in for an occasional social pint in winter, I slipped it deep into my 'I'll eat there eventually' file and left it alone.

Two recent visits, however, have not only turned me on to the full and charmingly rough glory of the place, but have turned me into an earnest and ardent fan for reasons that have nothing to do with marijuana or going to the bathroom with women. (Ahem!)

To begin with, Chill Winston boasts one of the most uniquely urban patios in the city. With no mountains, water or skyscrapers to gawk at, the eyes are drawn to the beauty of the immediate. Lest we forget, Gastown on a good day is drop-dead gorgeous, and this patio sprawls — in European style — out to meet the cobbles at its heart: old Gassy Jack's Maple Leaf Square. This was a good day.

The crowd was promising, too. I spied a few tourists, some lovebirds

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and some business types, sure, but the tables that really caught my eye were filled with a food-savvy brace of waiters, cooks, bartenders, managers, and restaurant owners from a number of local high-end joints, including such bright lights as Parkside, West, La Buca, the Beach House, Chow, and Bin 941. But did they really come for the food? I should think so.

My dining companion and I began with a ridiculously inexpensive and unfussy organic green salad (\$6). Its mix of peppery lettuces was lit up by a fig-and-grape vinaigrette, and sweetened a tickle with a few slices of pear. Little chunks of blue cheese and toasted walnuts gave it some extra weight, texture and earthy nuttiness, pushing it into “really quite good” territory.

Also to begin came a small and poorly presented side of what I now lovingly refer to as “artery crack” (though the menu describes it as “butter-poached pancetta potatoes”; \$4.50). Despite the lack of poetry on the plate, they tasted every bit as good as their name suggests and my name promises.

Next, some perfectly seared squid rings (\$9) wafted toward us in a hot pan containing an acidic and aromatic amalgam of caper, tomato, lemon and garlic. With a tall glass of Unibroue’s Blanche de Chambly beer from Quebec (\$7) in hand, I wiped my half-sated lips with a paper napkin, considered the attentive service, and, for a moment, wondered whether or not it might be wise to underestimate every restaurant from here on in.

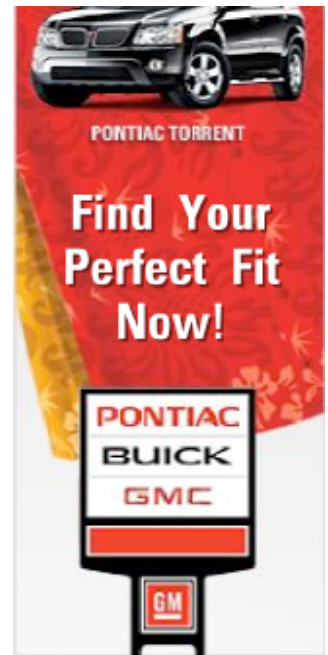
A little later (and with the sun now completely gone down), I happily mowed through three little two-ounce portions of medium-rare, balsamic-anointed beef tenderloin (\$22), each piece of which had been ingeniously topped with a pungent, trace-amount mix of bone marrow and Stilton. This, too, was shockingly good.

My dining companion had ordered wisely as well. His \$24 rack of lamb was surprisingly large (seven bones). Rubbed with mint and Dijon mustard, the meat was exquisitely tender and full-flavoured in its little puddle of salty, caramelized lamb jus. A killer deal.

Sides are ordered separately, so we shared some over-sweetened roasted root vegetables (\$4.50) as a nod to good health and the close of a very good, simple meal.

On the night of our next visit, the wind had picked up, so we stuck to the indoors. To some, Chill Winston’s open-plan interior — with its lounge seating, gleaming hardwood floors, huge sliding windows, brick walls, good music, and better vibe — might exemplify the possibilities of a hip, cleaned-up, 100-per-cent livable Gastown. But really, it’s proof positive that Chill Winston, like so many other new restaurants and businesses nearby, just couldn’t be bothered to wait for that reality to arrive.

Several bottles of Kronenbourg (\$4.50 each) were had at the bar, where “Nice Guy Steve,” the wickedly affable bartender (formerly of Ruby Foo, Bruneli, and other swish digs in New York City), was in full effect, keeping all his charges in good spirits — in the glass and in the soul. We ordered a thin-crust pizza that had been liberally smothered with an absurd-sounding but delicious garlic-and-chickpea goop, and topped with broccoli, cauliflower, Spanish onion and double-cream Brie (\$11). Like everything else about Chill Winston, it kicked ass.



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