



by David Morrison

“All you need is one knife, a pan and a fire.”

These few direct words are how master chef Brock Windsor sums up the brass tacks of his craft. Clearly, he is a man not too concerned with kitchen gadgetry. The affable proprietor of Stone Soup Inn also tells me his culinary creations are essentially as simple as camp food. When considering the emphasis on presentation associated with nouvelle cuisine, I understand what he means by this. Delivered to the table bearing little of the fussiness of that style of cooking, though not lacking attractiveness, his wonderfully creative dishes nonetheless remain high art in food form.

Windsor is a passionate advocate of the advancement of local ingredients, so everything he serves is from this area.

And as there is no menu here - patrons thereby placing total trust in their host (obviously in accordance with dislikes and allergies) - Stone Soup Inn affords a truly liberating dining experience. Of this approach, Windsor says: “One of the most famous chefs of all time – Fernand Point (1897-1955) of La Pyramide (in Vienne), outside Lyon – said: ‘The cook begins each day anew with nothing on the stove.’ I kind of believe in that. I have set plans in my mind, but I have to retain my flexibility because that leaves last minute things and inspiration still involved in a menu. As soon as you write a menu out, that’s what you have to cook.”

Furthermore, Windsor is a passionate advocate of the advancement of local ingredients, so everything he serves is from this area. “There are so many awesome products here that stand up on a world scale,” he states with sincerity and conviction.

Windsor’s food is of such quality and invention that I can say hand on heart I have never experienced a tastier or more exciting meal. Upon sipping the soup, I was transported, stunned by its smoothness and subtlety. His bacon is the best I have ever tasted. The duck? It slipped off the bone and all but melted on my tongue. I could go on, and will, but don’t want you drooling on the page just yet.

Stone Soup Inn is a farm-restaurant/B&B situated on Cowichan Lake Road, tucked into a pretty wood just off Highway 18. It also represents the realization of a lifelong dream. “I had a goal for twenty-two years to chef and own my own small farm-restaurant,” Windsor says. “Nowhere in my goal did it need to be the best restaurant in Canada, or an incredibly busy or successful restaurant, just that it was my restaurant.”

It’s interesting he should say this, as it could well be that this charming West Cowichan establishment, open only since April last year, is already viewed as one of the finest eateries in the country. Air Canada’s enRoute magazine certainly thinks so, including Stone Soup Inn in its Canada’s Best New Restaurants 2010 feature after just five months in business. But then when you have one of Canada’s most

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skilled chefs at the helm, this is to be expected: enRoute's Sarah Musgrave describes Windsor as "a thinking man's chef," whose cooking is "natural, even instinctual." On the evidence of the amazing five-course dinner he prepared for my wife and I, we are inclined to agree.

Windsor studied at the Stratford Chefs School in Stratford, ON, - the highest school of culinary learning in the country. "It's really small, high-end and a chefs' school, not a cooking school," he explains. "I really loved it, but it was also tough. Maybe two thirds or less come back for the second year."

Between his two years in Stratford and for five more after graduating, Windsor worked at the world-renowned Sooke Harbour House on Whiffen Spit Beach in Sooke. He progressed from apprentice to chef in three years at a restaurant that had been championing the use of local produce since 1979.

"From there I went to the Bearfoot Bistro in Whistler, which is probably Canada's most expensive restaurant," Windsor continues. "I worked there for four years and slowly changed the menu from a world focus to a local focus. After that I came back to the Island, as I love it here. I went to Brentwood Bay Lodge (& Spa), which was neat because it was a hole in the ground when I got there and a \$25 million hotel when I left! After that I worked on James Island for four years."

A somewhat impressive resume, one could say. All his years of high-end experience and natural, instinctual brilliance certainly went into creating our meal.

Served with warm, home-baked sourdough bread, our appetizer was apple and celeriac coleslaw with burnt Lakes Road hazelnuts, red Anjou pear, "Yoo Boo Blue" cheese (Hilary's Artisan Cheese, Cowichan Bay), Cylindra beet (Westwind Farm, Duncan) and Venturi-Schulze (Cobble Hill) balsamic vinegar. Mouth-watering!

The soup - oh, the soup! - was Jerusalem artichoke, chanterelle (Skutz Falls) and creamed winter vegetable, with two quail eggs (Mill Bay) and three triangular (line-caught, Adams River) sockeye salmon-belly crackers. New superlatives for its deliciousness are currently being formulated.

The fish course: line-caught lingcod with home-raised and home- alder, maple and rosemary wood-smoked bacon, yellowfoot mushrooms, caramelized Brussels sprouts and parsnip puree. We could have gone home happy and sated at this point, but then...

The main course consisted of local duck confit with miso white beans, kale with shallots, squash and rutabaga with blackcurrant jus. (The miso was the sole non-local ingredient in the entire meal but, hey, we'd say that's forgivable.)

With perfect spacing between all courses, the experience was completed by a lemon verbena crème brûlée with wild blueberries, poached pear and blackberry sorbet, then complementary Dragonfly Hill (Saanich) bumbleberry dessert wine and handmade dark chocolate-fresh mint truffles. Like, wow...

Naturally, the wine list is all Vancouver Island, including Merridale Ciders (Cobble Hill) and a small selection of local beers. We decided on a 2008 Averill Creek



Brock and Rigako Windsor with their young son, Eiji



Prevost: Merachal Foch (Duncan), which complimented the food beautifully.

This meal was simply fantastic. It was, if you will, so much more than food. In 1979 the famous French chef and restaurateur, Alain Chapel (1937-90), told Time magazine: "Cooking is an act of love." When one can taste the love that has gone into preparing the food, as we did at Stone Soup Inn, it is not only a deeply satisfying dining experience, but also an emotional one.

"I could have opened in downtown Victoria and perhaps been full every night," says Windsor, "but I wanted a special place, a destination place." It is safe to say that this is what he has already developed here, a world-class restaurant worth travelling to.

Yet there is even more to Stone Soup Inn than the dining. The B&B component is also superb. Offering two immaculate suites, this part of the business is run by Windsor's wife, Ayako, who he first met at a Whistler bus stop after his car had broken down!

Providing the height of comfort, Stone Soup Inn's suites perfectly reflect the establishment's emphasis on local products and talent. Adorning the off-white walls of our room were a beautiful Cowichan sweater, a print of Victoria painter Cecil Oakes' work, Mystic Beach, and framed prints of vintage Vancouver Island tourism posters, all serving to offer a warm local welcome.

The colour scheme is as subtle and calming as it is minimal and tasteful. The entire suite is decorated and fitted, down to the linens, in earth tones, leaning towards the shades of brown and delicate greens in that spectrum, offset by plenty of cream and white. There are lovely touches, like the Oriental-style handmade paper lamps on the night stands, and the furniture is a nice mix of modern and antique. It's also a paradise for texture nuts, with such as a deep brown velour counterpane, brushed cotton drapes and suede armchairs all pleasing to the touch!

Other features include a shared terrace and hot tub, huge Waterpik EcoRain™ showerhead and a fun collective nouns plaque outside the front door. We were pleased to discover from this that the rather downbeat name for a group of turtledoves is 'a pitying,' so one learns something every day!

As an overall luxurious "staycation" experience, we found Stone Soup Inn nigh on impossible to fault. The setting is lovely with an away-from-it-all feel, yet it affords easy access to Duncan, Lake Cowichan and the myriad wonders of the Cowichan Valley. This truly is an accommodation and restaurant of the highest quality, right on our doorstep, offering good value for the blue-ribbon services on offer.

And yes, before you ask, the breakfasts are amazing. ■

Photographs by Ayako Windsor

Stone Soup Inn is at 6755 Cowichan Lake Road. For bookings and reservations call (250) 749-3848. For further information email visit www.stonesoupinn.ca or email Brock and Ayako Windsor at info@stonesoupinn.ca.



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