

THE PACIFIC RESTAURANT

It's hard to think of a more culinary-friendly Inner Harbour hotel than Hotel Grand Pacific. Sure, people think of the Empress, but for many people that isn't an everyday destination. In addition to HGP's casually elegant Pacific Restaurant, they also have their exclusive, fine dining Mark Restaurant, and their sunny and cheerful Courtyard Café coffee shop. They also host a regular International Winemaker's Dinner series, welcoming wineries from such places as France, Chile and South Africa, as well as providing space for culinary festivals and events like the Whisky Festival. The hotel is also Victoria headquarters for the International Sommelier Guild studies.

So when I saw the Pacific Restaurant was participating in Dine Around this year, I thought it worthy of a visit. The open-plan restaurant runs along the front corner of the hotel's main floor, right off the lobby and with wide windows out onto Belleville Street and the Harbour beyond. We chose the \$35 menu, though the \$25 was very tempting (Bitter Stout Braised Lamb Shank) as well. Warm kalamata olive and asiago rolls arrived, along with our bottle of the recommended VQA 2002 Mission Hill Reserve Shiraz and we watched the room slowly and steadily start to fill – a mix of hotel guests, Dine Arounders and sharply dressed seniors. To start, we each chose the Winter Greens – a generous portion of mixed young lettuces, topped with shredded beets and carrots and tossed with blueberry maple vinaigrette. The whole came in a grilled papadum bowl – a spicy black pepper bite in the bowl nicely complementing the subtle sweetness of the maple dressing. This was a great palate opener to ready us for our substantial mains. Fellow chose the 8oz Peppercorn Dusted Rib Eye, grilled to perfection and topped with savoury butter. I selected the Chicken Breast – skillet roasted and wrapped with prosciutto. Both entrees came with a strudel of potato rosti and mushrooms, and fresh steamed spring asparagus, carrots and beans. The steak was tender and cooked to perfection, the peppercorns adding subtle heat. My chicken, while not as moist due to the skillet cooking, was very flavourful, with the salty bacon kicking the flavours up a notch. Both were clean, fresh flavours, beautifully presented on oversize white dishes. Our Shiraz, full of white pepper, spice and oaky dark fruit, complemented both dishes very well, and we took our sweet time in savouring the bottle. Good thing too – as it gave us time to digest before our rich desserts. Hot from the oven Molten Chocolate Cake for fellow – on a pool of tangy raspberry sauce and topped with melting vanilla bean ice cream, and Ambrosia Apple and Frangipane Tart for me – redolent with marzipan and cinnamon spice.

Throughout the entire evening, service was attentive and helpful – time is obviously spent on training here, and it does make a difference. The Hotel Grand Pacific has options for every taste and budget – and terrific value to be found in their Dine Around menus.

Bon Appetit – The Secret Diner