



Brett Shantz, executive chef and owner of Verses, talks with patrons at the chef's table. Verses, a former Apostolic church on Victoria Street in Kitchener, included a chef's table next to its basement kitchen where Shantz creates an original tasting menu for up to eight patrons.

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Visiting Verses

Best seat in the house is next to the kitchen

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There was a time when being seated next to the restaurant kitchen was considered a snub by management. Now it's become the place to be -- especially when it's at the chef's table.

All of this is part of the trend to food as entertainment, and for some foodies being close to the action (the kitchen and its activities) is a one-on-one experience between the chef and a handful of patrons willing to pay handsomely for a special menu designed specifically for them.

Verses, a Kitchener restaurant housed in the former New Apostolic Church, opened its doors last year and with it a chef's table in a small room next to the basement kitchen.

"It came about accidentally," said Brett Shantz, head chef and co-owner of Verses, who oversees a kitchen staff of about 11 serving lunch, dinner, private parties, weddings and special events.

When he and partner Debbie McFadden, general manager of the establishment, purchased the church, their plan was to place the kitchen upstairs adjacent to the dining room, but there was not enough space.

"So we decided to put the kitchen downstairs and the idea of adding a chef's table in the next room seemed a natural." Since doing so, Shantz says it has been well received by those who have been there.

"In terms of success, the chef's table has been hot and cold with times when we have three or four a week, and then we have three weeks where there is nothing."

Having never experienced a chef's table, I joined five foodie friends one day for lunch at Verses and was pleasantly surprised by how different this type of dining can be.

First of all, we had no idea what Shantz was preparing for us, so there was an element of mystery as we were ushered into the room by our waiter and sommelier, Andrew McVicar.

With each offering, served with complementary wines, Shantz explained how he sourced the ingredients and why he prepared a specific dish on the tasting menu.

"I think six courses is good," he said, adding that he charges \$120 per person with additional cost for wine pairings.

For this, patrons get the use of the private dining room, the services of a waiter and sommelier with the tasting menu items provided by the head chef.

"We know that the people who are ordering at the chef's table will appreciate all the effort that goes into it and the different varieties of food we are doing."

Here is a sample of what our group was served: Organic herb and squab salad, seared Quebec foie gras with scallops and fresh hamachi sashimi served alongside jade bamboo sushi rice.

The palate cleanser was cardamom-scented melon mist. That was followed by milk-fed suckling pig served with organic French green beans and garlic scape potato croquettes.

Dessert was another astonishing surprise. Verses' pastry chef, Paula Ross, who has a mulberry bush growing in her front yard, decided to take advantage of the berries and created three desserts with them at the centre.

The morning of the event, she shook the berries off the bush into a sheet at 6 a.m. and used her talents to make mulberry soda with sour cream ice cream, frozen mulberry and cantaloupe souffle and an almond cake with strawberry and mulberry compote with white chocolate Swiss cheese decor.

"All the presentations were amazing," said cookbook author Rose Murray, who participated in the lunch.

"It's an interesting concept because it's a time for the chef to experiment with ingredients and try different things and then see the reaction from his guests."

For Rainer Stadus of Waterloo, who also attended, it "was a sharing experience and being able to be there and be part of the action in the kitchen was incredible."

Two fun features noticed at the restaurant: the women's washroom has red-striped blown-glass wash basins and the signs outside the restrooms read Hymns and Hers, obviously in deference to the restaurant's holier beginnings.

Verses is located at 182 Victoria St. N. in Kitchener. To learn more about Verses, visit www.versesrestaurant.ca.

THE CHEF'S TABLE

A chef's table is located in or near the kitchen of a restaurant and is reserved for special groups of patrons who wish to savour the experience.

Patrons are served a tasting menu prepared and served by the head chef and maitre d'.

Restaurants usually require a minimum party (six to eight guests) and charge a flat fee (e.g., \$100 and up per person).

Chef's tables are usually found in high-end restaurants and are sometimes available only by specific invitation.

SOURCE: WIKIPEDIA.

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SQUAB, LETTUCE AND TOMATO SALAD

4 squab breast supremes

30 ml (2 tablespoons) canola oil

Kosher salt and white pepper

6 slices limpa bread (see note)

Butter

3 slices prosciutto

60 g (2 oz) herb salad blend of Thai basil, amaranth, lemon thyme, chives, thyme, basil, dill, Italian parsley, fennel seedlings

30 g (1 oz) baby arugula

50 ml (1/4 cup) roasted red pepper mayonnaise

2 small green heirloom tomatoes, cut into 6 slices

2 small red or yellow heirloom tomatoes, cut into 6 slices

1- Cut thinly sliced prosciutto into 5-cm (2-inch) squares and lay on parchment-lined baking sheet. Cover with parchment and another baking sheet to keep prosciutto flat and bake in a 100 C (200 F) oven for 30 to 45 minutes or until prosciutto is crispy. Set aside.

2 - Blend pureed roasted red pepper with homemade mayonnaise and a pinch of cayenne pepper. Set aside.

3 - Cut 12 4-cm (1 1/2-inch) rounds of limpa bread. Butter both sides and grill. Set aside.

4 - Season squab breasts to taste with kosher salt and crushed black pepper. In sauté pan on medium-high heat, add oil, then place squab breasts in pan, skin side down, and sear for four to five minutes or until skin is crispy and brown. Turn breasts over and sear just another 30 seconds. Squab should be served rare. Set aside to rest.

5 - Gather all ingredients and prepare to assemble. Place small mound of herb salad on plate and set one grilled limpa round in centre. Top with a dollop of red pepper mayonnaise. Place thin slices of squab on limpa. Top with one slice of each type of tomato and a small amount of arugula. Top with prosciutto crisp. Top this with second slice of limpa and another dollop of red pepper mayonnaise. Garnish with baby arugula.

Makes six servings.

SOURCE: VERSES RESTAURANT

WINE MATCH: APPLEBY LANE 2006 NELSON SAUVIGNON BLANC.

LIMPA IS A MOIST RYE BREAD FLAVOURED WITH FENNEL OR ANISE, CUMIN AND ORANGE PEEL.

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