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Dropping anchor in Halifax

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Presented by



Ashley Fraser / Canwest News Service

It was early Saturday morning late last fall. I was on one of my twice-annual trips to Halifax to visit my eldest son, a second year political-science student at Dalhousie University. To be sure, I love the lad, and miss him, but truth be, there are other reasons for visits. I have a deep weakness for the city of Halifax, its rich history, its colourful architecture, and increasingly, its welcoming restaurants and other fertile grazing spots.

On this particular morning I was wandering the Halifax Farmers' Market looking for breakfast options. A crêpe? A pain au chocolat? A three-inch thick waffle smothered with strawberry sauce?

No, no and no.

I venture deeper into the maze of tunnels and stalls. Garlic sausage on a bun? Now we're getting somewhere. And then I see it. Like a lighthouse in a sea of jagged rocks. The oyster stand.

Philip Docker's ShanDaph oysters, caught in the waters off Big Island in Docker's self-designed suspended cages. I used the first ShanDaph in sacrificial fashion, to purge the flavour of harsh coffee. Which freed up the second oyster to taste purely of itself - creamy, briny, salty. Docker shucked me a third and final, before I moved on to sausages courtesy of Bill Wood of Wood 'N Hart Farms, whose handmade stall sign reads encouragingly: "Eat More Lamb. 50,000 Coyotes Can't Be Wrong."

Final Market stop - Boulangerie La Vendéenne - for the best croissant this side of the Atlantic.

But it was those oysters that lingered with me longest, their supple delicacy, their fleshy sea-sweetness, bobbing to mind all day. It had been a happy morning. Waddling up the steep hill from the Farmers' Market to my hotel in search of a good cappuccino, I discovered The Smiling Goat Organic Espresso Bar, conveniently located next door to The Lord Nelson. It became a twice-daily pleasure.

I ended the day at a big, raucous, Greek eatery. Opa is an excellent place to be hungry. It is impossible to imagine sitting down here for a meal and rising at the end of it with a shred of appetite left. (This news may not surprise you - Greek restaurants are not known for dainty portions.) But it's not the quantity of food that impresses at Opa; it is the quality.

I dropped a small fortune there, feeding my son and his roommates, all ravenous and permanently broke blokes.

But I went alone to Fid.

I'd had enough of hungry college kids and Fid was my favourite of Halifax's high-end restaurants. By way of amuse bouche, a sea urchin harvested 25 minutes up the coast I'm told, served in its shell, splashed with sake. And then scallops, five perfect beauts, coral roe attached, deeply bronzed, on a smoky bed of roasted tomatillo. They haunt me still. Squash ice cream and a Parmigianotuile were the escorts for a tarte Tatin.

The 10-year-old Fid is owned by chef Dennis Johnston and maitre d' Monica Bauch. Named for the wooden, cone-shaped tool used by mariners to splice lines, Fid the restaurant is all about splicing flavours, weaving the local, sustainable products of the region with the British and Asian inclinations of its chef. Now, I must tell you, Fid shut its doors a few months ago, for a renovation and a rethink. It reopened in April, as Fid Resto.

Word is the white linen has been stripped off the tables, prices have been slashed and the new menu is filled with comfort food - fish cakes, gnocchi, lamb pie, steak and mash, cider-braised rabbit, scallops. Those gorgeous scallops I re-eat in my memory? University is four years. Gives me lots of time to check out the Fid changes and report back.

A Halifax visit is not complete without brunch at Jane's on the Common. Jane Wright's seven-year-old project has been a resounding success, judging by the noon queue for a Sunday table. Food is hearty and homey: ricotta pancakes, poached eggs and fish cakes, beet-and-fennel salad with maple sesame dressing, and a very fine bowl of seafood chowder.

Memorable meals can also be found in a pizza joint. In an Italian oven fired with fruitwood from the Annapolis Valley, Morris East is a newish restaurant for Halifax, serving thin-crust pizzas, soups, small plates and yummy desserts. And what pizza! As well as traditional sorts, with tomato, fresh mozzarella and basil, there are more unusual varieties. The poached pear pizza with maple and sage aioli, blue cheese and roasted shallots is surprisingly very good. They also offer an endearing lunch deal of a half pizza with a bowl of soup or a salad, for about \$10, and have an admirable wine list.

Take a drive ...

My son had a significant hole in his travel resume. Having lived in Halifax for over a year, he had never toured the serpentine Lighthouse Route that hugs the South Shore, never leaped the rocks at Peggy's Cove, or had a meal at Fleur de Sel in the lovely Lunenburg.

So I rent a car and take the boy west. It's November, and the road seems almost untravelled.

Kiwi Café: 15 Pleasant St., Chester, 1-902-275-2570, www.kiwicafechester.com

The Biscuit Eater: 16 Orchard St., Mahone Bay, 1-902-624-2665, www.biscuiteater.ca

Fleur de Sel: 52 Montague St., Lunenburg, 1-902-640-2121 or 1-877-723-7258, www.fleurdesel.net

Where to stay:

In Halifax: The Lord Nelson Hotel was closest to the Dalhousie campus, which is why I selected it. It also offers reduced rates to families associated with any of the area's universities. (2009-2010 rates are \$145 a night November to April; \$169 a night May to October). www.lordnelsonhotel.com

In Lunenburg: The Kaulbach House, 75 Pelham St., Lunenburg. This heritage Victorian, above, offers six guest rooms with ensuite baths. Breakfast included. Open May 1 to Oct. 31, off- season by reservation only. Room rates vary from \$99 to \$169, depending on room and season. Innkeepers: David and Jenny Hook. 1-902-634-8818 or 1-800-568-8818; www.kaulbachhouse.com.

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We arrive at Peggy's Cove at dusk. The light is glorious, slicing through the clouds in stunning rays. We have the place pretty much to ourselves. It is utterly, eerily lovely and whipped with a shockingly cold wind. We landlubbers always forget to bring a toque.

We might have felt alone at Peggy's Cove, but Fleur de Sel restaurant was packed. Housed in a yellow clapboard, arts-and-crafts style house smack in the centre of Lunenburg's historic district, this French restaurant draws deliciously from the sea and local farms for inspiration. The dish that best warmed me was a seafood risotto of stunning flavour and freshness.

We take our time on the way home, stopping at the Kiwi Café, an emerald green restaurant and coffee shop in the Village of Chester, owned by transplanted New Zealander Lynda Flinn. Toys and books for visiting kids, water bowls for visiting dogs and solidly good home-baking keeps the place crowded and the crowd happy.

The fire greets you more cheerily at the Biscuit Eater Café in Mahone Bay than does the donkey sign that demands you "Get your Ass in Here" - though this turns out to be good advice.

We order biscuits and as we sink our teeth through the salty, cheesy crust to the crumbly-hearted inside, there is a moment not just of mouth-pleasure, but also of relief - the relief of knowing that this little café-bookstore, with its sunny walls and bulging shelves, is perfectly named.

The cheese biscuit came with a thick bowl of black bean soup and a pulled-pork-and-blue-cheese sandwich, and ended with a strong espresso and a slab of chocolate cake - like the old fashioned, from-scratch birthday cake your mother made. Only considerably better.

If you go

Where to eat:

Halifax Farmers' Market: 1496 Lower Water St., Halifax, www.halifaxfarmersmarket.com. Open Saturdays from 7 a.m. to 1 p.m.

The Smiling Goat: 1551 South Park St., Halifax, 1-902-446-3366, www.smilinggoat.ca

Opa! Greek Taverna: 1565 Argyle St., Halifax, 1-902-492-7999, www.opataverna.com

Fid Resto: The Courtyard, 1569 Dresden Row, Halifax, 1-902-422-9162, www.fidresto.ca

Jane's on the Common: 2394 Robie St., Halifax, 1-902-431-5683, www.janesonthecommon.com

Morris East: 5212 Morris St., Halifax, 1-902-444-7663, www.morriseast.com