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RESTAURANTS

2012's Most Unforgettable Dining Experiences

Ten food obsessives recall their most remarkable mealtimes of the past year

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The 48-hour-roasted Angus beef short rib at Wildebeest
Milos Tosic

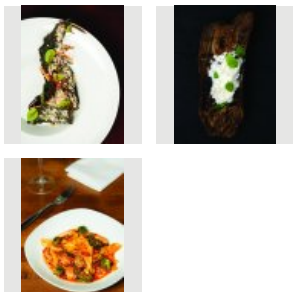
Le Dîner en Blanc

Flash mobs can sometimes be amusing when observed from a safe distance (like from in front of a computer screen)—for me, being involved in anything that smacks of a high school drama performance is nightmarish. So no one was more surprised when I found myself smack in the middle of the biggest flash mob the city has even seen. But *Le Dîner en Blanc* is no typical song-and-dance routine; it's a "secret supper" event that started in Paris 25 years ago and has now spread all over the world, from Mexico City to Kigali, and for the first time, Vancouver. Here's how it works: you sign up (and pay a \$25 fee), then show up at a designated meeting place wearing all white, with a folding table, chairs, linens, proper silverware and wine glasses, and a picnic dinner in tow. A group leader reveals the location of the flash-mob dinner, and you join the 1,200 others descending on, as it was in August for this inaugural year, Jack Poole Plaza. Edith Piaf warbled over the loud speakers as we cabooseed onto a winding line of tables and marvelled at the spectacle of the largest dinner party ever imagined. Most attendees brought their own food (sushi trays were popular, as were Tupperware tubs of gussied-up kale salad) but we opted to preorder chef Dale Mackay's picnic basket of charcuterie, cheese, olives, salads, and baguette, which was perfect, but sorta beside the point. There we were, chatting with our neighbours, drinking wine en plein air, watching the daylight fade and the Coal Harbour high-rises twinkle to life. And we raised our sparklers at the end of the meal as if to say, now the real fun begins. For then there was dancing to live music, and more wine, and the too-rare feeling of really being all in this together. **Rebecca Philips**

Quang Dang and Mourad Lahlou: One Night Only

The drenched Sunday of the Remembrance Day weekend, gutters plugged with leaves and the odd bedraggled poppy lost from snatched-at lapels. A dirty night to be out, and I admit it took force of will to bother. But the reward! Joining *West* (2881 Granville St., 604-738-8938) chef Quang Dang for one night only was San Francisco's Mourad Lahlou, whose 128-seat *Aziza* won in 2010 the first Michelin star for a Moroccan restaurant. Co-presenting was Bombay

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Sapphire gin, which explains the traditional welcome of mint-green tea goosed with sparkling wine and gin—a fiddle on custom, but no more so than the accompanying crostini with fresh cheese, grated almond, and tomato jam. And so the magic unfolded, seven courses balancing the rich spices and layered sauces of Morocco with the West Coast minimalism of both chefs: chicken liver mousse alight with berbere spicing; a lentil soup, heavy with tomato, enlivened by date, all sweetness and umami. And the mains: beef cheeks with brown butter couscous and a Moroccan spiced carrot jam that I could happily subsist on; black cod, simplicity itself, ringed by saffron broth; and—the star attraction—basteeya, a reverse chicken potpie of slow-braised meat holding a centre of well-balanced grains and herbs. With each dish, a bespoke gin cocktail from West barkeep David Wolowidnyk, the spirit infused, blended, sometimes sous-vided with herbs and seeds and fruits, the greatest of them the Beldi that won him the Bombay worlds in Marrakech in May. Rain?



What rain? □ **John Burns**

Whistler's World Oyster Invitational

The playground that is Whistler was designed to support Bacchanalia. So it was hardly surprising when my man told me he wanted to drive up the mountain for a boozy, all-you-can-slurp event called the World Oyster Invitational, hosted by the fine [Bearfoot Bistro](#) (4121 Village Green, Whistler, 604-932-3433). “Last year,” he enthused, “we practically died before the sun went down.” Sold. Clever organizers bolstered the dozens of shucking stations (all dishing plump Sawmill Bay oysters) with a concurrent Bloody Caesar Battle, which meant the order of the day was full, forward flavours. Downstairs, in Bearfoot’s legendary wine cellar, we discovered our favourite station: J.S. Dupuis, from [Tableau Bistro](#), was dishing screw-your-diet Oysters Kilpatrick buttressed with a touch of maple syrup (“a Quebecer’s secret weapon,” he whispered with a wink) and cooked bacon on top. For his accompanying cocktail, Dupuis went to the trouble of smoking a set of oysters in hickory, then dehydrating them and grinding them into a powder mixed with celery salt; this was the briny rim for each Caesar. The vodka itself was infused with bacon, jalapeños, horseradish, and shallots. The Worcestershire sauce was mingled with Louisiana sauce, cumin, and a hit of HP. These were major, enveloping tastes that managed to command the senses without getting crass. Later, as attendees started to tilt sideways, things ratcheted up with speed-shucking competitions (presided over by a rosy Fred Lee). Men from Canada, Ireland, and the U.S. (plus a lone woman, Noriko Kamashima, from Japan) bisected hundreds of shells to the crowd’s unabashedly fervent hoots. □ **Michael Harris**

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