

Persian Poet of the Plate

Arlene Kroeker

I love textures that can be seen with the eyes.

WHEN GLOBE AND MAIL WRITER IAN BROWN returned to Vancouver months after completing his summer feature "Eat Canada," he wanted to go out for dinner—my choice. I picked him up at his downtown hotel and drove south on Granville Street. As we crossed the Arthur Laing Bridge he looked toward the airport and said, "Are we going to Calgary?" A couple of turns later I pulled into the Westin Wall Centre, Vancouver Airport.

The Richmond locale is bleak, even in the dark of night. Hotel neighbours are an eyesore of grey—from boats and trailers to a cement factory and a self-storage facility. However, when we entered the one-year-old hotel and crossed the marble floor to The Apron we could have been in San Francisco or New York City. The restaurant—named not for a chef's apron, but after the airport ramp where planes are fuelled, loaded, unloaded, and boarded—is compact, shiny, and welcoming. Lime green leather chairs, walnut wood, retro-style carpet, and expansive windows to the north with enough landscaping to block out the reminder of where we are.

Why here? I wanted my guest to experience one of the city's best chefs: Hamid Salimian. Born in Iran, Chef Hamid grew up surrounded by citrus groves, dairy farms, and rice fields. He ate peaches, apricots, walnuts, green almonds, and cherries. Food was central in his life. His father worked in the hotel business; his mother and grandmother both cooked as well as pickled and canned the harvest. Hamid's job was to shuck the peas and help the gardeners. He lived sustainably, especially during wartime.

In Vancouver, he trained at Vancouver Community College and apprenticed at Sutton Place. He spent five years at Diva at the Met before moving to Victoria's Westin Bear Mountain Golf Resort. Early on in his career, he realized that he was competitive, so he entered the Culinary World Cup in Luxembourg in 2002, was a member of Team Canada in the 2003 American Culinary Classic in Chicago, and a member of Team BC in the 2004 Culinary Olympics. In 2008, as a member of Team Canada, he won four gold medals in the Culinary Olympics in Germany. He then hung up his competition hat and focused on cooking great food, so when the opportunity arose to open The Apron in January 2010, he accepted.

For our dinner at The Apron, we opted for the nine-course tasting menu. The evening began with a Mini Garden, a playful amusebouche with miniature vegetables—carrot, radish, zucchini—in a sour cream froth and popcorn dust that said, "This is from us, because we care about you."

Chef Hamid presents plates of art. For him, plating is eating. He looks at a plate of food and envisions how it will taste. "I love textures that can be seen with the eyes." Drawn to art galleries, photography, and poetry, he comes by his talent naturally—his maternal side of the family boasts several fine painters. His instruments, mediums, and canvas, however, are different than those of his ancestors.

Our server poured a puréed cauliflower soup over a bowl of sultana raisin purée, apple cider croutons, bacon dust, and cauliflower florets. After we cleaned our bowl, the next course arrived: puffed foie gras, beets, port bubble, sour cherries, and candied walnuts with fresh-baked brioche. I watched as Ian took a bite. His eyes widened and he paused, speechless for a full minute, before he pointed to the honeycomb-like foie gras and blurted, "This is the most amazing thing I've ever eaten."

Flank steak, cooked for 12 hours and cooled quickly, served with a horseradish cloud. Again, a moment of silence to salute the flavour. "How does he do that?" Ian asked.

Chef Hamid practises the food science of molecular gastronomy, transforming ingredients technically and artistically. His use of this technique is creative yet subtle. He doesn't want The Apron to be known as a molecular gastronomy restaurant. Instead, he uses the technique to make the best possible dishes, such as his BC side stripe prawns with popcorn powder; pan-seared scallops with coconut curry froth; or cassoulet with squid, chorizo, and red pepper foam.

When he apprenticed at The Sutton Hotel, Hamid watched the chef canning truffles. At the Metropolitan Hotel, he watched the chef transform 1000 pounds of strawberries into freezer jam. And he will never forget how his elderly German friend, Anna, in Northern BC, stored her apple jelly (as clear as water) for winter. Preserving summer is a way of life that makes sense to him.

A fan of Mason jars, he brings local farms to the table, even when the gardens are at rest. He connected with Miles Smart of Cherry Lane Farm (behind Richmond's Costco) and during the summer months, Hamid called in his order and Miles delivered the order four days later. Small beets (which he canned and fridge-pickled), kale, parsley, zucchini, Hungarian peppers (served in roast beef sandwiches for banquets), 200 pounds of cherry tomatoes (lightly pickled with sea asparagus), beefsteak tomatoes (sun-dried and the skins juiced), and the entire field of butternut squash for soup (Hamid hoped Miles would like the soup). On The Apron's menu is "Miles' Salad," with tomatoes that taste like summer because they were preserved the day they were picked.

After an introduction to Arzeena Hamir of the Fruit Tree Sharing Project and the Food Security Society, Hamid bought her supply of cucumbers (there were so many that he sent some to the chef at Raincity Grill), fingerling potatoes, kale, garlic, garlic scapes, Thumbelina carrots, radishes, and herbs.

Hamid sources food from friends with backyard trees. He gathered hazelnuts from one friend and preserved the figs from another. Inspired by the local harvest, he creates the menu.

He introduced Middle Eastern cuisine by renewing Persian classics (duck confit with walnut and pomegranate, and lamb cheek with parsley stew) in a playful, modern way. For Persian New Year (March 21 to April 4), Chef Hamid's nine-course menu included Abedogh kiar (yogurt, cucumber, mint, and wildflower); Gaote (pita, preserved walnut, basil, and feta); Fesenjan (slow-cooked duck leg, orange foam, and pomegranate); and Ghormeh Sabzi (lamb, red bean, stone-dried lime, and basmati rice), and for dessert, Faloodeh (lime rice noodles, rosewater, and pistachios) and Bagh-lava with Akbar Mashdi ice cream, a nod to the man who introduced ice cream to Iran in the late 1800s.

Even the burgers reflect Hamid's Persian influence. He grew up eating kabobs, which were lamb, beef, and onion molded onto a stick. He uses the same technique for The Apron's burgers, mixing the meat (for 90 seconds only) with fennel, cumin, and ancho chilis. Grilled and served on a house-made brioche bun with a signature ballpark sauce of sherry vinegar and roasted onions, it's a burger to remember.

Hamid nods to his heroes: Bruno Marti (La Belle Auberge), Scott Jaeger (The Pear Tree), and Michel Jacob (Le Crocodile). He says these chefs perfected consistency, which kept customers returning even during recessionary periods. They trained apprentices, thus giving the industry many exceptional chefs. He, too, teaches his apprentices techniques—such as making bacon onion jam, onion bubbles, apple pearls, and blown mozzarella—that will help them grow as chefs. (Although his walnuts preserved in water are the Chef's secret.) His radar is always up. He sources ingredients, acts on his ideas, buys cookbooks, and reads as much as he can about food. A day off includes a meeting with a local forager (for wild greens) and a trip into The Apron's kitchen because "it's a little bit of heaven." In turn, the kitchen crew is so invested in their work that they don't watch the clock.

Ian and I finished our nine-course tasting menu with Shattered Baklava, a deconstructed baklava with saffron pistachio ice cream, preserved peaches, and a rosewater honey bubble.

"I have a good feeling about this place," Ian said. "There's nothing but greatness here."

He paused. "Where are we?"

The Apron, Westin Wall Centre, 3099 Corvette Way, Richmond. 604-303-6565. westinvancouverairport.com/dining

On Tuesdays, Arlene Kroeker teaches creative writing at Langara College's Continuing Education. On Thursdays, she writes a weekly column about food for the Richmond Review. On Fridays, she calls The Apron and orders their brioche. On Saturdays, she picks up the hotout- of-the-oven delicacies and smothers them in butter and homemade strawberry jam.

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