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EXECUTIVE CHEF

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Best chef in Vancouver Hamid Salimian flies under the radar

by MICHELLE DA SILVA on MAR 14, 2013 at 3:23 AM

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STORY



In the Straight's restaurant-industry survey, insiders named Hamid Salimian as the city's best chef, and the restaurant he heads, Diva at the Met, as Vancouver's most underrated restaurant.

TRACEY KUSIEWICZ

IT HAPPENED NEARLY 16 years ago, but Vancouver chef Hamid Salimian still cringes at a mistake he made while he was a culinary arts student at Vancouver Community College. He wanted to impress his family by making beef stroganoff, but he bought the wrong cut of meat. "It turned out like a rubber glove," Salimian told the *Georgia Straight* in a phone interview. "You don't want to drop the ball when you're at home in front of everyone because they'll never forget it....'Remember that stroganoff you made?' 'Oh my God, yes, I remember. How can I forget it?'"

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The Georgia Straight's 16th annual Golden Plates

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That experience instilled in him the importance of attention to detail and helped shaped him into a meticulous, methodical chef. He's come a long way from his stroganoff days: Salimian is now executive chef at the Metropolitan Hotel Vancouver and its restaurant, Diva at the Met, and his industry peers have just voted him the best chef in Metro Vancouver.

Over the past few months, *Straight* staffers called up over 100 local restaurateurs, chefs, and managers and asked them to name the best chef, as well as the best restaurants in 11 categories. Respondents weren't permitted to vote for their own chef or



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restaurant, and answers were recorded anonymously to ensure candid voting.

While David Hawksworth, who *Straight* readers picked as the city's best chef, is a household name, the restaurant-industry winner is less well known. Salimian was born and raised in Iran and moved to Vancouver as a young man. After completing his culinary training, he started his career at the Sutton Place Hotel. Salimian's cooking style—blending Middle Eastern and Asian flavours using French techniques—continued to develop while he was working at Westin Bear Mountain Victoria and Richmond's Westin Wall Centre and through his participation in prestigious culinary competitions on behalf of Canada. In 2011, he was appointed executive chef of Diva at the Met.

For this year's Golden Plate Awards, restaurant-industry insiders chose Diva at the Met as Vancouver's most underrated restaurant.

Salimian describes Diva's menu as Pacific Northwest with an Asian influence and farm-to-table ingredients. He notes that it has global influences as well. "Some of it is French in many ways, but it's not French food," Salimian said. "If you really look at what we do, we are cooking the food of the land that we are on right now."

The chef takes a scientific approach to cooking, which some describe as molecular gastronomy. Salimian says he applies scientific principles simply to achieve the best possible product.

"If we're going to cook a crab, we take the water temperature, then we weigh the crab, and then we cook the crab," he explained. "Even when we pan-fry a piece of fish, we have a laser gun that we use so that the oil is at the right temperature to do it."

When making a vinaigrette, Salimian requires his staff to test pH levels of dressings to achieve consistency across all dishes. "We have five chefs on the line cooking each night—five chefs with the same direction but different palate," he said. "If you can somehow be in the same mind set as all your cooks, and you can all finish the dish with the same preciseness, then you win, and truly it's the guest that wins."

Readers will be more familiar with the industry's choice for best new restaurant: Wildebeest. The restaurant, which opened in Gastown last August, is known for nose-to-tail cooking, contemporary plating, and a large cocktail program. Executive chef Wesley Young, who took the reins in February after opening executive chef David Gunawan left, presides over an unabashedly meat-forward menu that includes sweetbreads, pork jowl, and bone marrow.

At the other end of the dietary spectrum, the Acorn placed second in the industry's "best new restaurant" survey and was voted "most vegan-friendly" by *Straight* readers. The popular East Van eatery, which has been serving elegant vegetarian cuisine since July 2012, placed well in several readers' choice categories, including best vegetarian and best new restaurant.

The long-running establishments Raincity Grill, Le Crocodile, and Vij's swept the industry awards for best West Coast, French, and Indian restaurants, respectively. However, several newer spots captured other categories: Bao Bei Chinese Brasserie for best Chinese, La Quercia for best Italian, and La Taqueria for best Latin American.

As Salimian noted, the food at Diva at the Met is difficult to categorize, but as a chef, his priority is to bring joy to his diners.

"Whatever I cook, it has to be tasty. That's the goal," he said. "I hope that I can say that I cook tasty food, and it's something that makes people smile."

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