

Local Talent

By Jane Giffen | Photography by Ellie Kistemaker



At the Five chef Anton Volek brings culinary passion and tenacity to the table

Ever since the term “locavore” entered our culinary lexicon, many chefs have embraced the idea of locally sourced ingredients. They talk the talk, but do they walk the walk?

Many content themselves with adding a local meat or vegetable on the menu and call it a day. Then there is Anton Volek, the young chef at At The Five, who brings a commitment to local ingredients of impeccable pedigree that few can match.

Born in Sarajevo, Volek grew up in Etobicoke, Ont. and had no youthful dreams of cooking for a living. But after two years studying biochemistry at McMaster, he traded his lab coat for chef's whites and enrolled in the culinary arts program at Humber College. Graduation was followed by stints at the Windsor Arms and Bouchon in Toronto. He is reticent to mention his survival of a grueling apprenticeship at Gordon Ramsay's cruel but delicious empire at the Boxwood Café in London.

Upon returning to Ontario, Volek worked at Scaramouche and eventually became junior sous chef at Spencer's at the Waterfront in Burlington



under Chris Haworth, an English chef who was trained by Marco Pierre White (who in turn had trained Ramsay).

When asked where he places himself on the pantheon of irascible bastard chefs, Volek breaks into a wry smile.

"The job is stressful," he says. "Every plate is a first impression. And you are trying to push the envelope with the food you are doing."

When he arrived at At The Five in January 2009, he was frustrated by the difficulty in getting top-notch ingredients, such as seafood, in Barrie. Not happy with his suppliers, Volek's solution was to drive to Toronto to get what he needed.

Sourcing local ingredients meant countless visits to area farms.

"Being so close to these producers, I felt I had to take advantage of that," he says. "I want to put as much as I can on the menu. I would go to the farms as ask 'what do you do best?' But it has to be sustainable."

As a diner, it's easy to take for granted how difficult it is to get this food on the plate. On his sole day off, Volek regularly drives to Fergus, Ont. to buy duck that meets his standards. Much of the fish and meat on his menu is broken down in house, so Volek can get the precise cuts he wants. And sometimes Mother Nature and human error put Volek to the test. When aphids wipe out a crop of lettuce or the farmer forgets

to take the lambs to the slaughterhouse, Volek has to improvise with his menu.

His latest menu is a tribute to these impeccable ingredients.

Dingo Farms (in Bradford) Berkshire pork fills pillow-like agnolotti, sitting on a bed of citrusy, barely wilted rainbow chard, and punctuated with crisps of Pingue prosciutto from Niagara. Rabbit is braised with a hint of clove and comes with gnocchi (made from choux pastry dough) with an ethereal lightness.

But his true talent is shown with his adept handling of seafood.

Shetland salmon (Scotland is one of the very few producers of organic salmon) is perfectly pan seared and roasted and served on a bed of glistening beluga lentils anointed with horseradish white wine cream sauce. The visual effect is a whimsical play on fish and caviar.

Although Volek attests that no one on staff is a pastry chef, the house-made desserts show the same talent for combining excellent ingredients with perfect technique.

Word is the carrot cake has a cult-like following. The chocolate cake, perhaps a shadow of Volek's past in chemistry, is an ethereal amalgam of butter, sugar, eggs and chocolate.

"I can't cheat with the food that I am doing," Volek notes. "The ingredients have to be good. The fish has to be fresh. I'm not crusting it with anything. I'm not dousing it with sauce. And it's a pretty intimate relationship I have with the diner. They are consuming something that I am creating. It's got to be healthful; it's got to be satiating. It's honest and simple and done well."

Volek's commitment does not remain solely on the plate; it extends to the front of the house as well.

His servers are impeccably trained, and chat knowledgeably about the menu and wine list. Although he downplays his knowledge of wine, his wine list shows his palate with entries such as Frog's Leap Chardonnay from the Napa Valley. Plans are afoot to broaden the wine offerings by the glass.

When asked what else he would like to do, Volek, who is also a talented photographer, says, "A day off would be nice. I'd like to spend more time with my girlfriend Lindsay. Put in a good word for me." ■



DISCOVER FORTY CREEK WHISKY



Rated #1

Tonight,
You Be The
Judge.

Double Gold Medal
San Francisco World Spirits

Best Canadian Whisky
New England Whisky Festival

Gold Medal
World Selection, Brussels

Highest Award
International Spirits Challenge,
London, England

Highest Score
Beverage Testing Institute,
Chicago, 2007

Enjoy Forty Creek Responsibly.

FortyCreekWhisky.com

*The Chocolate Cake is
Ruined! HELP!*

*Make hors d'oeuvres
for 20!*

*How do you make
Mini Beef
Wellingtons?????*

*Pickup Artisan Cheese
Platter & Crackers*

Holidays Shouldn't be this Stressful!

Let Angela and her team take care of all your
Holiday Entertaining

516 Bryne Dr. Barrie

Cravings
FINE FOOD MARKET & CATERING

705-734-2272

www.cravingsfinefood.ca