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The Telegram

The Telegram (St. John's)
Food & Drink, Saturday, October 18, 2008, p. E4

Some of the best food on the island in Joe Batt's Arm

Karl Wells

Nicole's Café

Joe Batt's Arm

Fogo Island

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You will not find many restaurants that evolved quite the way Nicole's Café in Joe Batt's Arm evolved.

The Nicole of Nicole's is a young woman named Nicole Torrville who had a dream to open a restaurant on Fogo Island. The problem was, she had no collateral and hence, no way of raising the money to start a restaurant. Enter Shorefast, a foundation dedicated to the development of eco-tourism in rural Newfoundland. Shorefast was in the midst of developing a "Fogo Island cuisine" with the help of consulting chef, Steve Vardy. Recognizing a common interest, Shorefast not only loaned Torrville the funds to start up her restaurant, but also provided the services of Chef Vardy (on a temporary basis.)

The result was a cosy, brightly coloured café, large enough to accommodate about 40 diners. Nicole's has hardwood flooring, traditional hardwood "outport kitchen" tables and chairs, a wood-burning stove in the corner, quilts on the walls, as well as plenty of local artwork and crafts - like handmade

rolling pins and berry mashers. All art and craft pieces are for sale.

Adding to the strong "Newfoundland" theme was background music featuring Newfoundland traditional musicians like Harry Hibbs.

Chef Vardy developed a menu for Nicole's using ingredients readily available on Fogo. Seafood and local vegetables play a major role, as well as staples like salt meat, dried peas and preserves. Vardy favours artisanal cuisine so you won't find many mass-produced ingredients being used at Nicole's. The result is a small menu, but one of exceptional quality. Nicole's may be a modest café on a tiny island off the northeast coast of Newfoundland, but it is serving food that would please the most discriminating palates.

Very soon Chef Vardy will return to Ottawa for other projects. Meanwhile Chef Shaun Hussey has joined Vardy. Hussey will assume responsibility for Nicole's kitchen. When I visited Nicole's, both were working side by side on a very busy Saturday night during Fogo Island's Partridgeberry Festival.

Amuse

Steve Vardy has a firm opinion on the role of the amuse bouche. He believes one should feel hungry and thirsty after consuming an amuse.

"It's meant to set you up to want more."

That's why he always makes sure the amuse has a slightly higher level of acidity and salinity than other courses. For our appetite enhancer he prepared grilled squid with bacon. Strips of squid (approximately 2.5 cm x 8 cm) were perfectly cooked and topped with a slice of crispy bacon of approximately the same size.

The plate was decorated with a sprinkling of cracked salt and pepper, as well as droplets of a sweet bright-red sauce. For garnish, Vardy's superior knife skills were in evidence. He created a delicate pile of julienne red onion and Granny Smith apple. It sat in the centre of the plate adding contrast, flavour and texture. I've tasted squid many times in the past. I've never tasted better than Steve Vardy's. Vardy's squid dish was simple, thoughtful in its balance of ingredients, and delicious.

Many years ago, I tasted a soup. I've never forgotten its taste. It was a simple cabbage soup. I purchased a bowl of it for a modest sum from a tiny Polish restaurant near McGill University in Montreal. It was an amazing treat on a brisk, bone-chilling day around Christmas. That soup was a great lesson for me. It demonstrated how just one or two ingredients of good quality can



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produce an extraordinary meal. That's how I felt about Nicole's organic cabbage soup. It didn't consist of much more than sliced cabbage, thinly sliced carrot, a few bits of salt pork and water. Yet it had wonderful flavour from the combined goodness of each ingredient.

Scallops and crab

An appetizer combining sea scallops and snow crabmeat seemed entirely appropriate given the number of crab pots I spied while visiting Fogo Island. The scallops were nicely caramelized on top and dotted with a tiny portion of snow crabmeat. The seafood was succulent. It was accented with a small amount of the restaurant's preserved tomato relish and pickled red onions.

Cod is king at Nicole's, and with good reason. The restaurant purchases cod from a local fisherman who is participating in an experiment with cod pots. The experiment is sanctioned by various official organizations. A cod pot is a large square frame with netting that allows a cod to swim into it but not to exit.

Figure:

Scallops and crab. - Submitted photo

Above: Slow-braised duck legs served over risotto, organic kale and apple compote. Right: pan fried cod with cabbage and split peas in a butter broth

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When the pot is lifted out of the water by crane, the cod is alive and healthy. This provides consumers with the freshest fish possible. (Another benefit is zero bycatch. Catch other than cod is released back to the sea alive and well.)

We tasted this extremely fresh cod. Two pan-seared fillets were served, crispy skin on, with cabbage and split peas in a butter broth. A dollop of beet relish decorated the top of the fish, looking very like a spoonful of caviar. It was a simple but elegant presentation. The cod tasted as good as its billing implied. The fillets were thick, richly flavoured and delicately textured. It was magnificent cod.

Conclusions

Finally, I concluded my meal with a couple of slow-braised duck legs. It was a suitable dish for a cool fall evening and a good match for my glass of pinot noir. The legs were served over a root vegetable risotto, organic kale and apple compote. The duck meat fell from the bone - as it should have from braising. Each item tasted delicious.

With the exception of a handful of top St. John's restaurants, Nicole's Café in Joe Batt's Arm is serving some of, if not *the* best food you'll find in Newfoundland. If you ever have the opportunity, check it out. You won't be sorry. For you folks on Fogo, Nicole's will be open all winter. That means it needs your support to survive.

Rating: ***

Price: Dinner for two with wine and gratuity - \$120 (approximately)

Best Points: Food and service

Sound level: Moderate

Wheelchair Access: Yes

** Fair ** Good *** Excellent eeee
Exceptional Karl Wells is a restaurant panellist with enRoute and judge with the Cuisine Canada/University of Guelph Culinary Book Awards. He is also co-host of the upcoming Rogers TV show "One Chef One Critic." To reach him, log on to his website: www.karlwells.com.*

The Telegram

The Telegram (St. John's)
Food & Drink, Saturday, October 25, 2008, p. E1

Fogo's Foodie FUTURE Tweaking traditional to taste

by Karl Wells

I went to Fogo Island specifically to interview Steve Vardy. Vardy is a talented 30-year-old chef, born and raised in Gander. At 14 he moved with his family to Ontario. A year ago he re-located to Fogo Island, shocking much of the restaurant crowd in Ottawa, where he'd become a culinary star. My mission was to find out why Vardy left the limelight of the nation's capital - where he'd cooked for the likes of The Rolling Stones and Joni Mitchell - in favour of Fogo Island. I got my answer and more besides.

We met at Nicole's Café in Joe Batt's Arm, an excellent restaurant that Vardy and an organization called Shorefast helped launch. In a way, Nicole's has become the cornerstone of what Steve Vardy and Shorefast (his employer) hope to build on Fogo Island. They want to make Fogo Island a "world class" destination for its heritage and culture.

Food is a big part of Newfoundland culture so Vardy was assigned the task of tweaking our traditional cuisine for Fogo. You can taste his creations at Nicole's Café. He describes his cooking style as "old school romantic with contemporary flair."

He's been working with mostly Fogo Island ingredients - berries, greens and seafood - to create dishes that

present well but also retain the essence of Newfoundland food. An example would be pan-fried cod that hasn't been dredged in flour and coated with egg wash, as most would do. Vardy's done the fillet with skin on, seared on high heat until the skin is crispy. Instead of serving it with green peas and mashed potato, he's chosen cabbage, split peas and scrunchions in a butter broth with beet relish.

Other dishes are outright fusion creations like his pulled salt beef pappardelle. It's fresh handmade pasta with strands of salt beef, local kale, garlic, caramelized parsnip and chipped Parmesan. With the exception of a sprig of parsley for decoration, Vardy wisely chose to make no changes to traditional jiggs dinner.

Why Fogo?

So, why did he leave the bright lights and migrate to a tiny island off the northeast coast of Newfoundland?

"We came back to be a part of, or to create the geo-tourism project. So that's working with the heritage, the culture and the history of rural Newfoundland. The reason we're here on Fogo, the lady who founded this foundation, my boss, Zita Cobb, is from here. And I grew up in Gander, which is pretty close to here. So, it's a good place to start. One day we may

very well branch out to other areas of Newfoundland but, right now, we're just trying to get through what we're doing here and that's challenging enough. It'll be a very long project, a work in progress."

Zita Cobb, the driving force behind this project is a remarkable woman. She left Fogo Island many years ago as a young person and found fame and fortune. She rose through corporate ranks to become one of the most powerful business leaders in North America. Now retired she spends her time on projects like Fogo Island and sharing her knowledge and expertise with others. I've met her. She's an impressive "no bull" human being. She has conviction and although there's an "If you build it they will come" aura about her ideas for Fogo Island, you get the feeling she will make it happen. And, so far, they have been coming.

For example, on the early October weekend I visited, Joe Batt's Arm was site of the Fogo Island Partridgeberry Harvest Festival. It was an indoor, food-dominated event held at the Iceberg Arena. The chief organizer (and Shorefast associate) was an avuncular and articulate ex-pat Brit named Jonathan Briggs. Zita Cobb had the idea, but it was clipboard-toting Briggs who volunteered to make it happen. Frankly, I was

expecting a handful of visitors for the two-day event but the festival attracted a large steady stream of tourists and locals. Even optimistic Steve Vardy was slightly surprised by how well the event did.

Baking competition

The centerpiece of the festival was a berry baking competition. A long table in the middle of the arena was laden with muffins, cakes, pies, tarts, breads and other baked creations. Folk from all over the island participated. The judges included (to my surprise) famous Canadian restaurateur, Robert Bourassa. Bourassa was owner, until its close, of the iconic Ottawa-Hull restaurant, Café Henry Burger - where some of the biggest celebrities in the world dined over the years, including Bob Hope and Audrey Hepburn. Bourassa's wife, Liz (also a judge) is a close personal friend of Zita Cobb.

Shorefast's newest Consulting Chef and Fogo Island resident, Michelle LeBlanc, was also present. LeBlanc is a Nova Scotia native who worked in Cape Cod for eight years. (Her husband, Shaun Hussey, is a chef at Nicole's.) She's been developing berry ice creams for Fogo Island. Her samples had many festival attendees smacking their lips. Wanting to learn a little more about Shorefast's take on food tourism, I asked Michelle LeBlanc for a definition.

"I think people go places specifically for food. And, I think that we can definitely convince people to come to Fogo Island specifically for what's here. I really don't think we need to do much to the food that already

exists. Simple things, the fish that's here, the berries that are here, things that people have been doing on Fogo Island for years. We just have to get the word out and market the products."

I'd heard lots about fish and berries but I wondered if Fogo Island was doing any agriculture. LeBlanc responded.

"We do have a local agriculturalist by the name of Winston Osmond who is farming organically and is raising animals. He is just becoming established and has many projects that he's hoping to develop over the winter, a farmers market being one of them. We hope to be able to have a local farmers market starting next summer."

A glitch

Steve Vardy pointed out a glitch in Shorefast's plans to sell local meat to Nicole's and other restaurants. In Canada, meat sold to the public must be slaughtered at a federally inspected slaughterhouse. Fogo Island does not have a slaughterhouse. Vardy says they are working on a solution.

"One idea that we do have is to look into a mobile slaughterhouse, which is something that they use in Europe. There's a lot of small communities in Europe and the European way is very similar to what we want to do here. And to build a slaughterhouse here, it wouldn't work because there's not enough business to keep a slaughterhouse going just for Fogo Island. But, when you get a mobile slaughterhouse and this guy drives around from town to town, does the slaughtering, does the testing and then

gives you the certification, that would work. Fogo Island can be one stop of many around the loop."

Creating year round tourism on Fogo Island is something that many would argue is a tough sell. Even Steve Vardy seemed to acknowledge that.

"There's not a lot of the bells and whistles that travellers will get if they're going to look at Disneyland for example. But our strategy is to promote that we're exactly the opposite in fact. You're coming here to look at the history and heritage of a place. We're not altering anything. We're not putting up Ferris wheels and roller coasters and what not. We've really done nothing in terms of that. All we're doing is just showcasing what's always gone on here."

Steve Vardy went on to tell me that he felt the Fogo Island project would never work unless it was amazing, "not good on a provincial scale or national scale, but great on an international scale." I'm not exactly sure what "great on an international scale" means in terms of Fogo Island. What Shorefast has done so far in promoting festivals like August's Great Fogo Island Punt Race and October's Partridgeberry Harvest Festival has been impressive. Nicole's Café is working and next summer Shorefast hopes to develop a new ice cream parlour featuring homemade island berry ice creams.

"If you build it they will come?" Time will tell.

If you'd like to learn more about Shorefast and its projects, log onto <http://www.shorefast.org/>

Figure:

Vardy works his magic in the kitchen of Nicole's Café.

Chef Steve Vardy is putting a master's touch to traditional and non-traditional fare on Fogo Island.

Crowds flocked to Joe Batt's Arm to the site of the Fogo Island Partridgeberry Harvest Festival. It was an indoor, food-dominated event held at the Iceberg Arena which featured a berry baking competition.

Canadian restaurateur, Robert Bourassa

Berry creations at the fair.

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