

Restaurant Reviews

The Brass Monkey

by Lisa Louise Santonato

Sunlight streams in through large bay windows, coloured glass reveals late afternoon tones with hints of English Bay, and peacock feathers catch my eye near the back of the room. Orange glass blown lamps with teardrops hang by the fire. The scent of spice and honey mixes throughout the air, a sweet mélange created by The Brass Monkey, the newest bistro recently added to the West End fare.

Located at 1072 Denman Street, The Brass Monkey warmly invites with its rich tapestry of colours, flavours and scents fashioned together by local set designer Jason Sutherland. From the unique menu design with its heavy brass handle and the welcome letter inside, to the deep greens and rich red tones, to the built-in fireplace embellished by toys and ordinary little chachkas, I couldn't quite decide what, specifically seemed unique about this little bistro. Was it the lounge light made from an old globe? Or was it the restaurant's penchant for plastic fruit, suitably hung from the chandeliers? If anything, the ambience seemed to affect the kind of treatment and care normally reserved for treasured knick-knacks found in your great-great-grandmother's Victorian drawing room.

The Brass Monkey is the result of a collective effort established with personal tastes in mind. Between co-owners Karin and Brian Lutz, and head chef Jeff Wilmott, a true entrepreneurial spirit permeates through the scent of 'almond crusted goat's cheese gently warmed and drizzled with a ginger-balsamic beurre blanc'. "I wanted a place where I could feel comfortable and relax," says Brian. "We want people to come in here and feel really happy and at home." Well, I certainly felt at home with the gorgeously subtle scent of Gnocchi. Hand rolled in-house, this Italian pasta took me further than home. I'm sure I detected its scent wafting out from the kitchen and into my senses, awakening my ancestral roots back to the old country.

The home-style treatment goes even further. "I don't allow anyone to smoke in here since I am a non-smoker myself, and when I walk through the restaurant, I like to be able to smell my own food." Jeff takes a look around, eyes bright and shining. "It's nice to take a step back in this business, and go at it from the ground level up. Every now and then I'll take off my chef's coat and walk around the restaurant and talk to people rather than being the dirty little secret that works in the back..."

By 7:15 the restaurant is full. At a table nearby, a group of five women sit in a circle around colourful helium balloons sprung from the table's centre. To my left, a few couples sit, holding hands and gazing, softly in the light. And at my table by the fire, a few women have joined me on the big comfy couch opposite. This is the home of Jack Daniels lime dip, Cajun fried chicken, Beef Tenderloin and Steak Tar Tare. With a Fresh Sheet that changes every week, the 22 year old Wilmott is well-seasoned in the art of spicy cuisine. "I take time to do it properly," says Wilmott. "I like to enhance the essence of spices. I combine subtle flavours, creating recipes from head to mouth."

Like the Chef's Tenderloin? A 'slow-roasted beef tenderloin stuffed with wild mushrooms and roasted garlic, served with a sundried black cherry and port demi-glace.' Hmmmm... Gorgeous. But before I could leave The Brass Monkey, I wanted to know two things: why is the place named so, and how is that subtle combination between sweetness and spice created? Of course, chefs never tell such secrets, and I'd prefer it remain a mystery. As for the bistro's name.... I see no evil, smell no evil, or taste no evil in this drawing room.

The Brass Monkey is open from Monday to Saturday with full kitchen and bar menu until 2 am. Outdoor patio seating available until 11 pm. Dinner ranges from \$20 to \$70. 1072 Denman Street, Vancouver.

