

Food

Luxe dining on the links

Lago at Eagles Nest Golf Club

★★★★ (out of four)

Location: 10000 Dufferin St. (at Major Mackenzie Dr.), Maple; 905-417-2300, www.eaglesnestgolf.com.

Executive Chef: David Gaunt
Hours: Lunch: 11:30 a.m. - 2:30 p.m. Monday through Friday; Dinner: 5 p.m. - 9:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. Closed for private parties Saturday and Sunday.

Wheelchair access: Accessible, with washroom equipped for people with disabilities.

You could ask, "What's a chef like you doing in a place like this?"

After all, the chef is renowned among the downtown food crowd and the place he's in is surrounded by acres of land that are still being bulldozed for new semi-detached homes.

But there's no better evidence of this city's surge to the suburbs than the decamping of David Gaunt from upscale urban restaurants like Cucina and Rose-

Dining Out

JUDY GERSTEL

water Supper Club for a golf club in Maple. A golf club! Over 30 km from King and Yonge!

So what is a chef like Gaunt doing in a place like this?

Well, I'll tell you.

He's doing wonderful things.

Things like tiny ravioli plumped with squab liver mousse composed with wild mushrooms and slowly braised short ribs in a small, savoury starter ("Postage Stamps," \$17) that is so earthy, so rich and sensuous that it's the appetizer equivalent of making love in front of a campfire in the woods.

Things like tomato soup (\$8) presented as a small composition of a few plum tomatoes, poached mussels and shards of rolled chewy egg pasta arranged in the center of a large soup plate into which the server decants a spicy tomato and clam broth redolent with fennel.

Things like foccaccia that quickly becomes an addiction, cake-like in texture with a light

salty crust, studded with fennel seeds and sweet golden raisins, offered from the bread basket. To allow it near anything less than extra virgin olive oil and 12-year old balsamic vinegar would be a sacrilege, and so Armando, server extraordinaire, arrives to pool some on your bread plate.

Or a single, sublime thing like a solo fig (\$5), singing of soaking luxuriously for months in port, balsamic vinegar, thyme, sugar, orange peel, clove, a bit of black peppercorn, with a cinnamon stick for good measure. And then cossetted with dolce de latte Gorgonzola and swathed in the superior prosciutto of Niagara Food Specialties.

But all this is the beginning.

Mains are more straightforward. And there's a pronounced European influence on the menu, with hearty rabbit cacciatore (\$27), slowly cooked salt cod (the least distinguished of dishes sampled) with clams, tomatoes and potatoes (\$24 as a lunch main; \$18 as a first course) and, as a starter, perfectly grilled sardines served with roast peppers and arugula (\$12).

But the real influence at Lago isn't ethnic. It isn't geographical.

It's gender.

Lago is all about masculinity, as befits an upscale golf club with greens fees of \$175.

And masculinity translates, as it so often does, into a desire for flesh in abundance — to wit, the small steaks are 22 ounces, large ones may mass at 30 ounces and up — up to 48 ounces (\$45 and up). "They were a sight," recalls chef Gaunt, about the three pound hunks of red meat. Reportedly, last summer, one was not taken home in part in a doggie bag.

Gaunt dry ages the steaks for six or seven weeks and then broils them at 1500 degrees whereupon they are brought to the men, primal and yielding willingly to the knife.

But a lady of more modest appetites may enjoy the thighs and legs of a game hen (\$19), crackly with herbs, accompanied by arugula dressed with currants, slivers of red onion and pine nuts and served on foccaccia grilled and gradually softened

and transformed by *jus* into stuffing.

Or one night at dinner, presalé lamb, oh, so delicate and delicious on the plate.

Predictably, at a place like Lago, the wine list is superb (and the wine is served in Reidel at \$25 a stem). But unpredictably, the cellar is truly phenomenal. It's a glass-enclosed room adjacent to the upstairs private dining room which, like the well-appointed main room, is handsome with dark wood and a view of the course.

Selecting a wine here is a challenge but Armando is only too willing to engage in oenological discourse. Service at Lago is educational, as well as being slick and attentive — although at lunch last week, two lone ladies among five tables of high-powered businessmen waited too long for their food to arrive.

Dessert (each \$10) brings wonderful house-made ice cream, or a trio of small pots of crème brûlée, crème caramel and chocolate mousse, or an artful arrangement of five varieties, shapes and textures of choco-

- ★★★★★ Outstanding
- ★★★★☆ Excellent
- ★★★☆☆ Very good
- ★★★☆☆ Good
- ★★☆☆☆ Fair
- ★☆☆☆☆ Poor
- ★☆☆☆☆ Awful

late: tiny wafers, swirls of white mousse, a miniature brownie, a ball of dark ice.

The menu at Lago changes over the next couple of weeks, with summer weather and golf season. Gaunt speaks eagerly of his plans, including "beautiful young goat," couscous with mint and coriander, strawberry ice cream made with balsamic vinegar.

It's reasonable to suggest that dining on the terrace at Lago ranks right up there with a hole-in-one (and other aforementioned pleasures of the outdoors) among the grace notes of summer in the surrounds of this city.

Star reviewers make at least two anonymous visits to restaurants. Today's Dining Out review focuses on restaurants beyond central Toronto. Saturday's Dining Out review covers downtown. Email: jgerstel@thestar.ca.