

## Fisherman's Friend

FISH WAS ALWAYS ON THE table when **Robert Clark** was growing up in the salmon-abundant York River region of Quebec. Caught by his father and prepared the same day, the fish were the prime ingredients in the homespun dinners that forged Clark's love of fresh seafood and later provided the inspiration for his pioneering career. Now executive chef at Vancouver's award-winning **C restaurant** (2-1600 Howe St., 604.681.1164), Clark has made a virtue of swimming against the tide.



Clark spent 10 years perfecting his craft at top Toronto eateries and on a formative working trek around the world. Upon arriving in British Columbia in 1992, he was intent on diving into the West Coast's marine smorgasbord. "I came here thinking I'd have access to great seafood, but that wasn't the case," the chef says. "The industry here was more about quantity than quality."

Committed to unlocking this forgotten aquatic larder, Clark hooked up with restaurateur Harry Kambolis to open C, Vancouver's most adventurous fish and shellfish restaurant. "The mandate was to serve real seafood," says Clark. "If it came from the ocean, I cooked it. We were very experimental, sourcing previously unavailable local products like whelks, sea cucumber, and gooseneck barnacles."

Regional suppliers soon came onboard, and dedicated diners began arriving for a unique culinary experience. Today's menu, although not quite as experimental as in C's early years, remains creative and contemporary. "My philosophy has always been that great food is about the products, not about the chef," Clark says.

His scallops wrapped in octopus bacon and served with foie gras is an ever-popular dish, while deceptively uncomplicated items like side-stripe prawns and Kagan Bay scallops are a revelation to many. Clark's approach has even encouraged a trend of wild salmon on menus across the city. "Farmed Atlantic salmon is consistent wherever you eat it, but we don't want homogeneity," he says. "Our wild Skeena sockeye is difficult to pre-prepare, but it has a more distinctive taste."

### Perfect Food Moments

Clark recalls a meal in Vietnam where, anticipating regional dishes, he was served Texas fried chicken. "The meal was disappointing, but I'm still emotional when I think of the expense and effort, the hosts went to," he says.

Clark is still proving that “wild-caught” supplies are a viable alternative. “Sustainable harvesting, rather than simply depleting our seafood resources, is a major issue. Partnering with Vancouver Aquarium’s Ocean Wise initiative and 30 other local restaurants, we are slowly changing the way the industry works.”

— *John Lee*