



*Prestons' pasta carbonara is as delicious as it is aesthetic.*

# Reinventing the Classics

## PRESTONS RESTAURANT & LOUNGE PUTS A CURIOUS TWIST ON FAMILIAR FOODS

**I'VE ALWAYS CONSIDERED** myself something of a foodie, forever ready for new and exotic dining experiences. Except when I'm not. Sometimes I just want familiar fare, especially at the end of a long business day.

Problem is, standard menu items are often uninspired, more or less the same no matter where you order them. Chances are you already know what the breaded calamari, buffalo wings, burger, steak, pasta, grilled salmon, and caesar salad are going to taste like before you order.

Not so at Prestons Restaurant & Lounge in Vancouver's Coal Harbour district. Guided by

Executive Chef Justin Paakkunainen, Prestons has reinvented a range of classic menu items, elevating the ordinary to extraordinary.

I regularly travel to Vancouver on Helijet, and over the past 10 years I have latched onto a number of familiar restaurants and lounges close to the Downton Harbour Heliport. In all this time, I had never heard of Prestons until a colleague tipped me off that it was a hidden gem buried near the city's financial district. As such, I decided to take my wife, Heather, for dinner there on a recent weekend getaway to Vancouver.

Located in the Coast Coal Harbour Hotel on West Pender Street, Prestons first presents as a fairly typical upscale hotel restaurant with casual contemporary décor in an intimate setting. Settling into a cozy corner booth, Heather and I begin poring over the menu and at first glance the choices seem underwhelming: wings; calamari; clam chowder; spinach & kale caesar; carbonara; beef tenderloin; chicken parmesan...Ho hum.

Then we read the exotic descriptions beneath each tried-and-true staple. Heather and I often order calamari to start, but this reads like nothing we've had before: "crispy fried thin-sliced

Humboldt squid petals with mustard green pesto, crispy sea asparagus, and hot mustard aioli.” Likewise, the grilled salmon: “seasoned with pink Himalayan salt and pink peppercorns and served with a sweet potato puree, charred leeks, and strawberry relish.” The pattern continues with vegetarian dishes, such as the zucchini noodles, “tossed with almond pesto, coconut cream, marinated white balsamic tomatoes, and braised mushrooms, finished with garlic basil oil, and crispy basil.”

Deciding what to order takes longer than anticipated so we order a cocktail and a couple appetizers to start. Heather eyeballs the fluffy, deep-fried avocado fritters with bacon remoulade, but ultimately opts for the seared scallops. I characteristically lean towards my beloved calamari, but in the end I can’t resist the siren song of Dijon-maple-caramel chicken wings.

Heather orders a delightful sparkling rosé to go with her scallops, but I decide on something sweet and sour to match my wings. I ask our server, Jillian Bennett, to have the bartender surprise me with a suitable cocktail pairing, and she soon returns with a Bourbon Sour developed in-house by Prestons’ affable bartender, Ian Leila.

The tart-sweet libation is the ideal complement to all four sticky wings. That’s right, four wings. That might sound a bit light for a pound of wings, but these are not your typical wings. Large and plump, each full wing is brined for three hours before a 23-ingredient spice rub is applied. The wings are slow roasted until just done, then flash fried for a crispy outside skin. At that point any number of sauces are coated on, including the Dijon-maple-caramel option.

First bites surpass expectations. The crispy, caramelized skin is a *mélange* of sweet, spicy and tangy flavours that linger on the palate as I devour the moist meat. Heather asks if she can try one, and I reluctantly agree on condition I can have one of her seared scallops.

It seems a shame to mess with the presentation of her beautiful bivalves. Embedded in a luminescent-orange smoked carrot puree are four juicy scallops seared golden-white in duck fat, adorned with pickled kombu, crispy wild rice puffs and a white balsamic reduction. I quickly get over my qualms about desecrating the artful arrangement and jab a fork into one of the scallops before Heather can reconsider. The crispy outside of the



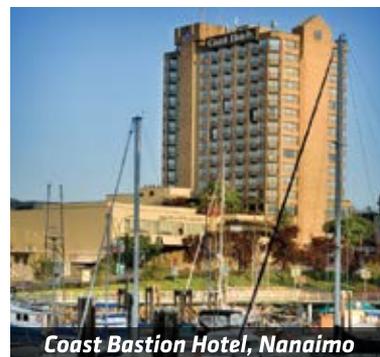
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scallop extends about a millimeter into the sweet, delicate flesh of the mollusk, cooked just barely this side of rare. The first bite is exquisite, but the second — swirled in smokey, savoury carrot *purée* — is even better.

“Oh, that’s goooooood,” sighs Heather. “And I don’t even like carrots!”

The appetizers have set the bar high, leaving us hungry and hopeful as we order our main courses — pasta carbonara for Heather; beef tenderloin for me.

The presentation of both dishes is impressive and appealing. The beef is a tenderloin tower constructed with a seven-ounce thyme-and-bay leaf-rubbed filet mounted atop a foundation of house cut fries. Atop the tenderloin is a pat of bourbon *crème fraiche*, and crispy-fried sour onion, all surrounded by a scattering of freshly pickled chanterelle mushrooms, black garlic crisps, and fire-blistered vine-ripened tomatoes.

I momentarily ponder how best to cut into this work of art before hunger drives me to carve through the middle of it with my serrated steak knife, revealing a beautiful dark-pink centre. The delightful combination of sweet *crème fraiche* and savoury herb-infused meat is exquisite, improved only by a glass of full-bodied 2012 Wynns Coonawarra Estate Cabernet Sauvignon. This is perhaps the most delightful steak I’ve enjoyed in the



*Prestons Beef Tenderloin is a seven-ounce thyme- and bay leaf-rubbed filet topped with bourbon *crème fraiche*, sour onion, and black garlic crisps. Served with pickled chanterelle mushrooms, fire blistered vine ripened tomatoes, and house cut fries*

past decade, but the grand prize for presentation and flavour tonight has to go to the pasta carbonara Heather opted for. Comprised of three different types of spaghetti — whole wheat, sour cream and squid ink — the tri-colour noodles are cooked to perfection then arranged like a bird’s nest on the plate with a soft-cooked egg positioned at centre, sprinkled with shavings of Pecorino Romano cheese. Our server explains it’s best to toss the cheese, egg and pasta together, and as Heather complies the swirl of noodles reveals embedded slivers of maitaki mushroom, green swiss chard and chunks of house-made bacon.

The combination of these ingredients is greater than the sum of its parts: the nuanced flavours of the spaghetti noodles, coated in glistening egg, melds with smoked bacon chunks and salty cheese, all underscored by umami hints of chewy mushroom. Heather asks me what might pair best with this and, knowing she loves her bubbles, I steer her towards a glass of Casti prosecco.

“This is not like any carbonara I’ve had before,” she exclaims. “Usually it’s just a fancy spaghetti dish with bacon, eggs and cheese. I never expected anything quite this beautiful, or delicious.”

There is not much left on our respective plates when Jillian arrives with the dessert menu. As always, Heather passes on dessert, knowing full well she can steal from me. As such, I order Preston’s signature Japanese Cheesecake, which it turns out was developed as a subtle nod to the Japanese owners of Prestons and Coast Hotels.

Unlike your typical dense cheesecake, this variation is made with goat cheese, giving it a light, spongy texture, neatly complimented by a dollop of *cremeux*. The dessert’s creaminess contrasts wonderfully with toppings of chewy candied-lemon slices and crunchy, candy-gingered pralines and pistachios, all dusted with a fine coconut citrus powder. Each bite is a sublime concoction of flavour and texture. I order a dram of Coopers Choice Scotch, matured in sherry cask, to go with our dessert and Heather helps herself to that, too. The silky, smooth whisky doesn’t overpower the delicate flavours of the cheesecake, but we are perhaps guilty of gilding the lily.

Nevertheless, it is the ideal ending to an exceptional dining experience — one that we can look forward to enjoying again on our next trip to Vancouver. 🍷