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June 10, 2011

Seattle, a Tasting Menu

By FRANK BRUNI

OUR waitress was in a panic, and no wonder. She couldn't pinpoint the cradle of our clams.

We had asked where they were from in an off-handed fashion, my companion and I. We weren't especially concerned. But in provenance-conscious, environment-attuned Seattle, such a question can all too easily be heard as a challenge, a taunt: assure us that these mollusks weren't the denizens of some distant seabed, relocated through a lavish outlay of fossil fuel. Prove to us that they're bivalves from the 'hood.

And her inability to do so could be seen as delinquent, punishable by up to six months of hard labor in a community garden.

"They're definitely local," she stammered, nodding hard.

"From around here," she added, lest we misconstrue the concept of local.

She darted away to confer with another server, then returned with triumphant confirmation: "Lopez Island!" It is one of the San Juan Islands, just 80 miles or so from the Seattle neighborhood in which this restaurant, the Walrus and the Carpenter, makes its briny home. And the San Juans are to seafood what Bravo is to so-called housewives: a seemingly limitless trove of peerless specimens. The clams in question — butter clams, to be exact, which the restaurant had deployed in a sublime tartare — are just one example. They nominally promise softness, then come through with a bewitching sweetness as well.

To eat in and around Seattle, which I did recently and recommend heartily, isn't merely to eat well. It is to experience something that even many larger, more gastronomically celebrated cities and regions can't offer, not to this degree: a profound and exhilarating sense of place.

I'm hard-pressed to think of another corner or patch of the United States where the locavore sensibilities of the moment are on such florid (and often sweetly funny) display, or where they pay richer dividends, at least if you're a lover of fish. You could, I guess, make a case for the southern stretch of the Pacific Northwest around Portland, Ore., a city honored by its own cable television show, "Portlandia," which pokes fun at its artisanal obsessions, epicurean and otherwise. But

Portland isn't as connected to and intimate with the sea and tides as Seattle. It's not as wondrously watery.

In greater Seattle and the San Juan Islands you get a lineup and caliber of local oysters that aren't easily matched, in addition to superb spot prawns, salmon, black cod and halibut.

Did I mention Dungeness crab? The region is lousy with Dungeness crab. It came at me in more ways than I could keep track of. At Seatown, an enticing new restaurant near the Pike Place Market, it formed a snowy layer in a colorful, carefully molded puck with pale green avocado and glittering orange tobiko, which is flying fish roe. Seatown further used it with bacon in an unconventional B.L.T. For its part, the restaurant Madison Park Conservatory, an excellent recent arrival to the shores of Lake Washington, served Dungeness crab deviled eggs at brunch. Somewhere around Seattle, I'm certain, Dungeness crab gelato is being made. I simply didn't have the good (or ill?) fortune to find it.

The region provides a natural theater for this feast that's just as inimitable, a thrilling topography of steeply pitched hills and gently sloped mountains. Snowcaps shimmer on the horizon. Evergreens are everywhere — gargantuan and piney and so very, very pointy. The tree line has jags, edges. It looks as if it's serrated.

The region also has a spirit all its own, one that hews fetchingly to certain progressive, outdoorsy clichés; people show a fondness for bikes, beards, tattoos, flannel and all-weather pullovers that lies far outside the statistical norm. For humanitarian causes, too. Nowhere else have I received a hotel bill that included a $3 charitable donation.

"Um, what exactly is it for?" I asked the clerk checking me out of my room.

"It changes, but right now it's for Japanese disaster relief," she said. "You don't have to pay it. You can opt out." With three times that amount in minibar charges, I didn't see how that was possible. Not if I wanted to slink off to my rental car — which, I suddenly realized, wasn't a Prius or other such hybrid — with even the slenderest shred of dignity.

My trip came a bit too early in the year, at the end of April and beginning of May, when the rain hadn't let up and a chill persisted. But June, July, August: that's when the Pacific Northwest is most glorious. The clouds disperse and the sun shines plenty, but the temperature doesn't climb oppressively high.

I know that from previous visits to the region, and on the basis of those trips I can also say that its culinary strides of late seem especially long and fleet. One measure of these advances is the transformation of the Willows Inn, a longstanding lodge on Lummi Island that has recently become the focus of considerable chatter among (and pilgrimages by) restaurant lovers.

Lummi Island, a hilly, verdant, narrow finger of land that's only about 10 miles long, is another of the San Juans, and isn't especially trammeled or set up for significant tourism — at least not yet. After a roughly two-hour roadtrip from Seattle, a sign I confronted as soon as a ferry deposited me and my car there made that clear. It pegged the population at 816.

Lummi, which rhymes with chummy, has such a closed, cozy feeling that if you drive down streets away from the main part of town, people tilling their gardens or mowing their lawns look up expectantly, seemingly poised to wave hello to someone almost certain to be familiar to them. When they realize they don't know you, there's a moment's pause. Then they wave anyway.

Willows Inn goes back to 1910, but in 2001 its current owner, a commercial fisherman named Riley Starks, bought and began to refurbish it, turning each of its 15 rooms, including two cottages, a yurt and several suites, into rustic delights. He wanted to upgrade its restaurant, too, and make it a showcase for the island's small farms, one of which belongs to the inn, and for fresh catch from the surrounding waters. But his vision didn't fully come together until late last year, when a young chef who had spent several years at Noma, a Copenhagen restaurant internationally renowned for its dedication to local products and traditions, agreed to take over the kitchen.

The chef, Blaine Wetzel, 25, has tried to create a North American Noma by faithfully — even slavishly — reproducing the original's theatrics and grace notes. As at Noma, dishes come to the table in unconventional vessels: cedar boxes, clay flower pots, wicker baskets. As at Noma, there's a profuse deployment of arcane greens (beach mustard, sheep sorrel, pine shoots) and vivid flowers (salmonberry, arugula blossoms, wild roses), some of them pickled and many of them foraged — as at Noma — that very day. And in yet another crib from Noma, Mr. Wetzel and his assistant chefs deliver these dishes themselves, so they can brief you on the backstory of each ingredient and how very nearby it sprouted, bloomed, grazed or swam.

What they don't tell you, the printed menu does, providing assurances, for example, that reef netting, "considered one of the most sustainable fishing methods in the world," and the labors of "Lummi tribal members" were responsible for much of your seafood.

A bit much? Perhaps. But the atmospheric and gustatory joys of dinner, which is a pre-selected tasting menu of five courses for $85 (not including drinks, tax and tip) redeem the preciousness. The inn's hillside perch affords an expansive view from the dining room of the sea and the sky, streaked with orange and pink as the sun sets.

And Mr. Wetzel and his team for the most part do justice to incomparably fresh food. Seared spot prawns, floating in a cloud of mussel-broth foam, put me in mind of Lilliputian lobster tails. Their flavor was that rich, their texture that buttery. Equally tender fingerling potatoes, dressed with

melted havarti and buttermilk whey, had such a true, clear taste it was as if someone had infused them with, or marinated them in, some magical potato extract.

They had been harvested from the inn's farm, just a mile up the hillside. That's where I stayed, in a satellite suite the inn has there. Rosemary, rhubarb and lovage skirted its stoop. Through the front windows I could see and hear the strutting and clucking of free-range chickens. You want a closer relationship with what you eat? At the Willows Inn you can practically bed down with it.

By taking culinary trends further than other places manage or care to, Seattle and its environs put a pleasantly kooky spin on things — which brings me to Woodinville, an audacious exurb of Seattle that indulges Americans' deepened romance with regional winemaking through the illusion of vineyards where they don't really exist. There's no significant grape cultivation in Woodinville. That happens in areas of Washington far away. But to allow Seattle residents to sample the fruits of their state's considerable — and noteworthy — viticulture without a long drive, more than 90 winemakers have set up tasting rooms here, many within the last two years. And they've been joined recently by artisanal producers of vodka and whiskey who actually distill their grains in Woodinville office parks and warehouses, then sell them from adjacent tasting rooms, taking advantage of a captive audience of tipplers.

Signs near Woodinville's center, a familiar and tiresome collection of fast-food restaurants and chain stores, point the way to "wine country," which is largely a hodgepodge of outlying strip malls, gussied-up garages and other unromantic structures between which shoppers drive, shiny little maps in hand, just as they would from the Banana Republic outlet to the discount Timberland store and on to the J. Crew. It's as if Napa Valley had been reimagined as an outlet town.

The tasting rooms generally charge $10 to $20 for a flight of four to six shallow glasses and waive that fee if you purchase a bottle of wine. I'd recommend a stop at DeLille Cellars, in part because DeLille can be expected to showcase its justly beloved Chaleur Estate Blanc blend of sauvignon blanc and sémillon. (An even better Washington white blend is the sauvignon, sémillon and muscadelle from Buty Winery, an accomplished producer whose wines aren't in Woodinville but were on the list at Willows Inn when I dined there.) I'd also recommend the Project V distillery, which makes a brand of vodka called Single Silo, if only for its arch, shaggy vibe. Project V was having an open house the day I was there, so I could wander past the front retail counter — where a sign proclaims, "Vodka. It's Not Just for Breakfast Anymore" — to the guts of the operation in the back. There I beheld a porcelain tub covered in flowery decals that is used instead of an industrial vat in the mashing process; a drum kit that was serving an ambiguous purpose; and an inoperable, vintage Volkswagen bus filled with cardboard cases of finished vodka. The Volkswagen, apparently, is the Project V storage closet.

Woodinville has a claim to fame in addition to its boozy bounty: the Herbfarm, arguably the state's

most enduringly acclaimed restaurant and one of its most ardent promoters of regional food. It has been around 25 years, the last 10 of them in Woodinville, and for that reason I didn't eat there, keeping my focus on newer arrivals.

And in Seattle there were many — too many to experience in a compressed period of time, not unless I did absolutely nothing but eat. And this city encourages more than that, at least when the weather is good. During my stay it was and wasn't, the rain coming and then going and then coming back, with local residents issuing a running commentary about that. Although they're touchy about Seattle's soggy reputation, they do seem unusually jubilant — even evangelical — about drier days.

"You're going to have some sun while you're here!" said the woman at the Avis counter as I got my rental car.

"Can you believe this sunny day?" said the woman at the 7-Eleven counter three days later.

"Hope you enjoyed that sun!" said the woman at the Starbucks counter, a day after that. The sun had once again gone missing.

No matter the weather, I ran along Seattle's waterfront, Elliott Bay on one side, the skyline on the other. There are cities from which it's a short distance to natural splendor, and then there's Seattle, where wilderness and civilization bleed into each other, the dividing line nonexistent.

And it is plenty civilized. In the city's lively Capitol Hill neighborhood alone, I visited two irresistible bars that opened over the last two years or so. Both speak cheekily to cocktail mavens' current fascination with make-believe speakeasies.

One, called Knee High Stocking Co., is hidden inside a triangle-shaped house with no sign out front, just a doorbell with the bar's name in tiny letters near it. Another, Tavern Law, conceals a small, exclusive bar within a larger, well-identified one. To reach this hideaway, where many furnishings are early-20th-century antiques, you are advised to make advance arrangements, and someone on the inside has to let you in through a door disguised as the front of a bank vault.

As for restaurants, I had a fantastic brunch at Madison Park Conservatory, a new and refined American bistro that emphasizes the local and seasonal. Toward April's end that was apparently nettles. They were the centerpiece ingredients in both a soup and a frittata I enjoyed. For a meatier, less seasonal coda, I tacked on the restaurant's unforgettable egg sandwich, which trades the usual bacon for its uncured antecedent, pork belly. The belly is presented in thick dominoes of flesh whose fatty juices mingle with the runny yolk.

During lunch at Revel, a new contemporary Korean restaurant that is like a sleeker, sexier and

slightly less accomplished Momofuku Ssam Bar, to use a Manhattan analogy, I had an outstanding riff on bibimbap, the traditional rice dish, with asparagus, pistachios and olives. And I twice ventured from the city center out to Ballard, a traditionally unglamorous neighborhood being embraced by fashionable restaurateurs. It is here that the prominent Seattle chef Maria Hines recently opened the Golden Beetle, where she channels her earthy, organic inclinations in a Middle Eastern direction. And it is here that the Walrus and the Carpenter, named for a Lewis Carroll verse, shares a former ship-parts factory with not only a bicycle shop (it's Seattle, remember) but also a handsome new Italian restaurant, Staple & Fancy, that belongs to the chef Ethan Stowell. Like Ms. Hines, he's Seattle restaurant royalty.

I stopped by the Walrus on a Friday at 5:15 p.m., and already it was full, with the intense, palpable conviviality that so many restaurants aim for but so few achieve. That kind of warmth and vibrancy often boil down to luck: to the animation of the crowd that gathers, the pitch of people's voices. Here everyone seemed impossibly merry.

They sat on stools pulled up to high tables or a long counter, and they ate Blue Pool oysters and Hama Hama oysters and Sweetwater oysters and Eld Inlet oysters, all from Washington waters. The Walrus is essentially an embellished oyster bar, emphasis on embellished. In addition to raw shellfish it serves many cooked small plates and desserts — including, when I was there, grilled lamb tongue and a bay leaf panna cotta with a rhubarb compote — and a distinctive selection of wines, beers and cocktails.

The oysters are shucked with care: no clumsy haste, no messy errors. I closely watched the ace who shucked ours, impressed in equal measure by his skill and the elaborate beehive of what looked like dreadlocks atop his head.

When he finished shucking them, he put them before us, then did something for which I was unprepared — and very grateful. He handed us a neatly, precisely written cheat sheet that told us, from left to right, which oyster was which, so we didn't have to remember and wouldn't be confused. In this one odd-looking server at this one happy-making place, courtesy, earnestness, eccentric personal grooming and a proud scruffiness were all entwined. There was something so splendidly Seattle about that.

Seattle: A Tasting Menu

LODGING

Although its hundreds of rooms and horizontal sprawl can make it feel oppressive, the **Edgewater** (206-728-7000; edgewaterhotel.com) in Seattle has more arguments in its favor than against. It's situated on the very edge of Elliott Bay, part of Puget Sound, so that many of the rooms facing the

water have balconies that literally hover over it, with views far into the distance and seabirds circling overhead. It's also an easy walk to other waterfront attractions and there are great running and biking trails nearby. A standard double with a water view starts at about $300 in the summer.

In the Woodinville "wine country," the place to stay is the **Willows Lodge** (425-424-3900; willowslodge.com), a nexus of rustic and sumptuous that has two distinguished restaurants — the Herbfarm and the Barking Frog — across its driveway and rooms with enormous fireplaces and huge sunken tubs. In the summer, those rooms start at $219 on weeknights and $319 on weekends.

DINING

One restaurant you shouldn't miss, in terms of its festive atmosphere and the first-rate seafood, is the **Walrus and the Carpenter** (206-395-9227; thewalrusbar.com), in the Ballard neighborhood, about a 15-minute drive from the city center. Although it bills itself as an oyster bar, it's really much more, and two people can easily build a dinner of small plates for $80 to $90, including beer or wine but not tax and tip.

For a more centrally located, equally unfussy seafood alternative, there's **Seatown** (206-436-0390; tomdouglas.com), near the Pike Place Market, one of the latest additions to the Seattle chef and restaurateur Tom Douglas's ever-expanding local empire. It showcases raw oysters, smoked fish and rotisserie meats. It's a great place for a snack, but two can have a full lunch or dinner with beer or wine for anywhere from $60 to $100, excluding tax and tip.

Revel (206-547-2040; revelseattle.com), in the Fremont neighborhood, provides a sleek theater for contemporary Korean cooking that's gently priced: two people could have lunch or dinner, including wine, beer and one of its trademark ice cream sandwiches, for under $80.

Madison Park Conservatory (206-324-9701; madisonparkconservatory.com), with views of Lake Washington, is more expensive but worth it, for serious new American cooking with exemplary local ingredients. Dinner for two with wine: about $120.

And if you're up for an overnight trek out of town, consider the **Willows Inn** on Lummi Island (360-758-2620 for hotel and restaurant; willows-inn.com), which gets almost all its meat, vegetables and fruits from within a few square miles and doesn't look much farther for its catch. A five-course dinner is $85 a person, not including beverages, and rooms, cottages and suites at the inn are $195 to $625 a night.

DRINKING

In the Seattle exurb of Woodinville, more than 90 wineries and several distillers of hard liquor have tasting rooms, and while hours vary, most are open during the day (but not night) on

Saturdays and Sundays. The **Woodinville Wine Country** association (425-205-4394; woodinvillewinecountry.com) has more information, including maps, about wine tasting rooms.

Seattle itself has embraced current cocktail culture fully, and two of the best places to experience that are in its Capitol Hill neighborhood. **Knee High Stocking Co.** (206-979-7049; kneehighstocking.com) advises making a reservation via text message. **Tavern Law** (206-322-9734; tavernlaw.com), has a general area that's easily breached but also a hidden upstairs sanctum for which reservations may be necessary.

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