



All the

world's a kitchen

Michael Howell's world cuisine with local flavour

by Marie Nightingale

Photography: Perry Jackson

During a performance of the Shaw Festival's production of *Major Barbara*, a young actor from Chester, NS had a revelation on stage. After devoting five years to the theatre, Michael Howell had found himself in his role, thinking not of his cues, but of his next dinner party. It was then that he knew what he really wanted to do.

Although it would be another five years before he would give up his successful theatre career, which not only included acting and directing, but co-running the Harbinger Theatre company in Toronto, he decided to extend his passion for drama to a career in cooking.

Shortly after his final curtain call, and the day after he took Mary Harwell as his bride, they moved to the United States. Eventually, he registered at the Cooking and Hospitality Institute of Chicago, from which he graduated with honours. For the next two years, his training continued under Chef Jean Joho at Chicago's five-star Everest Room, touted as one of the top 50 restaurants in America.

Several notable positions followed as he travelled the globe learning about the cuisines of the world and gaining recognition in the culinary field. During his three-year stint as executive chef of the Green Turtle Club in

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Abaco, Bahamas, he was named “the best chef in the Bahamas,” by the Nassau Wine and Food Society. (The Green Turtle Club has been featured on “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous” with Robin Leech.)

These, along with his grade of Maître Rôtisseur, in the Chaine des Rôtisseurs and membership in the Canadian Federation of Chefs and Cooks, are impressive credentials to bring to Tempest, the restaurant he opened in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, with Mary as manager.

Taking into account Mary’s theatrical background as well—six years working with Donny Osmond as stage manager on the North American tour of “Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat,” as well as stage manager on the Tony Award-winning “Fosse” on Broadway—it seems only natural that the couple should choose the theatre town of Wolfville for their new roles. Even the restaurant’s name smacks of Shakespearean theatre.

Since its opening in April 2003, on premises formerly occupied by Alex Clavel’s Chez la Vigne, Chef Michael Howell has been taking bows of a different kind.

EnRoute Magazine named Tempest one of Canada’s top 42 restaurants, and featured in its publication a notation as “Best Nostalgia Fix in Canada” for its Gala Apple and Sour Cream Pie, a popular dessert menu item. As well, the restaurant was named Kings County New Business of the Year for 2003 by the Kings Chamber of Commerce, and it has been featured on the television

documentary show, *Opening Soon*, on Food Network Canada and The Fine Living Network in the US.

Chef Michael describes his cooking style as world cuisine with local flavours.

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These influences are evident in the meals he prepares, but his pride lies in presenting the best and freshest of local ingredients.

To choose the apples that go into his Apple and Sour Cream Pie, he tasted more than 20 varieties before settling on the Gala apple, grown by Andrew Bishop of Noggins Corner Farm, in Greenwich, NS.

“It’s not too sweet, it’s nice and crisp and stands up well to baking,” he says.

Rightly proud of his “stable” of suppliers, Chef Michael ranks among his favourite ingredients beautiful big, fat scallops; local peaches and cream corn; striped bass (which is generally fished recreationally from September through December); and Arctic char, now being farmed near Truro. He buys his greens and baby vegetables from Coldspring Farm.

“I love baby leeks, baby yellow carrots and baby haricots vert (french green beans). The sugars haven’t turned to starches and they’re still very sweet,” he says. “Only minimal cooking is required. I just blanch and shock them and rub them with extra virgin olive oil and sea salt, nothing else.”