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Le Marrakech celebrates Moroccan tastes

by: Tim Pawsey

It's a measure of just how "West Coast" cuisined we've all become that the arrival of Le Marrakech (52 Alexander St., 604-688-3714) should be such news. But it is.

It's also somehow fitting that the new spot should spring up in the space that once housed La Brochette--one of the area's more celebrated French rooms that for years (as its name suggested) housed the city's only open-fired rotisserie. Owner Abdel Elatouabi is a classically trained French chef himself--and if you have the time he'll regale you with wonderful stories about his experiences running the food and beverage operations at the prestigious Hilton in Rabat, back in his homeland.

Wrapped in vibrant red, Le Marrakech is an all-out celebration of everything Moroccan--from the low, hand-made tile tables, ornate black metal scones and intricately carved screens to the upbeat music that somehow morphs into "Hotel California" with a decidedly North African bent.

It works. And maybe even more so because it's not West Coast.

When Elatouabi opened his short-lived Bravo Bistro we wondered how come there were so few Moroccan dishes on the list. At the time, the chef wasn't convinced that Vancouver was ready so he headed in the other direction. Now, it seems, the time is ripe for a refreshing difference.

Flavours are bold, spicing is deep and occasionally fiery. But before we even get to what's on the plate, custom dictates that you'll be invited to wash your hands with rose water--a gesture repeated as you leave.

Such little touches set the mood for a menu that stays firmly in its authentic territory--except for plentiful salutes to fresh, local and often organic ingredients.

This isn't a small plate restaurant, but you could do worse than sit at the bar, which opens wide onto Alexander Street, and work your way through a trio of salads, or perhaps tangy mussels chermoula--or a delicious sliced goat cheese and golden beet salad. The beets are marinated in rose water, scattered with pine nuts and served with a gently tart pomegranate vinaigrette and orange blossom honey.

Marinated and dry-aged oxtail bastilla is another keeper: rich and dense meat with complex spicing, dusted with pistachio, while even lowly chick peas and cumin add up

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A Moroccan restaurant shouldn't be news in a city the size of Vancouver, but it is. Owner Abdel Elatouabi steeps Le Marrakech in all things Moroccan, including the bold and spicy flavours. Photo-Tim Pawsey

to a hearty, tasty snack.

Elatouabi can barely control his excitement when he talks about the fennel and salt-crusted bread, which he bakes daily, as well as the traditional Smen (salt butter). Bordering on addictive, its dense texture is ideal for dipping in the gently spicy saffron broth, in which swims a seafood casserole of Quadra Island mussels, fresh clams, ling cod, grilled scallop and a substantial spot prawn--and some merguez sausage, which imparts the spice. The chef shops for fish daily and it shows. (\$22)

Tagine cooking, another mainstay, yields a sizeable, tender Cornish game hen, which arrives with lashings of preserved lemon and green olives (\$19).

Too much of that bread may thwart your need for dessert but you can somehow always find room for a taste of m'hannsha--an impossibly sweet mix of honey, nougat and orange blossom rolled in pastry that is reminiscent of marginally more slimming baclava.

If you do feel a tad overstuffed (it can easily happen here) all is remedied with a glass of the best mint tea you'll find in Vancouver.

And if you should happen to fall for that table, or Moroccan tray and stand, you can pick one up at nearby Gate of Morocco Design (235 Cambie St., 604-723-6155)--which is how the restaurant came by its good looks.

BELLY'S BEST

- Pink Knot Ros 2006

There's still time to sip ros and this mix of Shiraz, Cab. Sauv. and Sangiovese is one of the season's best. Rhubarb and strawberry notes with decent acidity make it food friendly (chilled crab?) or just plain drinkable. BCLS, \$14.99.

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