

Diva hosts a remarkable reunion

BY DEANA LANCASTER, NORTH SHORE NEWS FEBRUARY 23, 2011 7:08 AM

Chef Michael Noble returns to Diva at the Met for one night only — March 10 — alongside all of the restaurant's former executive chefs.

Michael Noble was just 35 in the spring of 1996 -- a relatively unknown chef in Vancouver -- when he cooked his first meal at Diva at the Met.

He was coming off an executive sous chef gig at Four Seasons Hotel Vancouver, where he'd been quietly running the kitchen, and had recently been passed over for promotion to executive chef.

"It's one of those situations where when one door closes, a much nicer one opens somewhere else," says Noble on the phone from Notable, his new restaurant in Calgary.

The timing couldn't have been better. Hotelier Henry Wu and his team had big ideas, and they were looking for a young Canadian chef who would make headlines at the groundbreaking new restaurant.

Noble was exactly that.

So he crossed Howe Street, from Four Seasons to the Metropolitan, and there he made culinary history.

"Diva was, and always will be, a watershed in my career. It was the perfect thing, at the perfect time, in the perfect place."

The years that followed are legendary. Noble won a gold medal in the hot food competition at the 1996 World Culinary Olympics and he competed for Canada (for the second time) at the '97 Bocuse d'Or in France.

Gourmet Magazine named Diva "Top Table Vancouver"; it swept several categories in the Vancouver Magazine Restaurant Awards; GQ Magazine named Noble's Stilton Cheesecake the Top Taste of 1997; and he took Chef of the Year accolades from the British Columbia Chefs Association. Perhaps most memorably, in 1999 he was the first Canadian challenger ever to appear on the Japanese Television show, Iron Chef. The following year, Japanese Iron Chef Masaharu Morimoto joined him as guest chef during the promotion East Meets West at the Met.

"I don't know how I did it," he laughs. "You can ask my wife. It was a crazy time."

He learned plenty in those five and a half years he describes as "intense, beautiful and enjoyable," starting with designing the kitchen, creating and executing concepts and putting together the right team.

It's that last element that he has really carried with him.

"It's what I remember most about Diva: the people. It's where I learned how important they are to your success, and where I learned you have to take care of them." He backs it up with a long history of mentoring and supporting up-and-coming chefs and by treating his staff right.

(At Notable -- which in just six months is raking in diners and rave reviews in a lesser-known neighbourhood of northwest Calgary -- staff get a daily "family meal" at 4 p.m.)

And it's the people he worked with through his Diva years that Noble is most looking forward to seeing when he flies to Vancouver in two weeks for Div[a]ine Evolution, Diva at the Met's 15th anniversary gala dinner.

All five of the restaurant's former executive chefs will return for one night: Thursday, March 10 -- and Noble worked with or has connections to all of them.

Which doesn't mean that he isn't looking forward to cooking his course at the dinner. Though I am under orders not to tell you what it is, Noble described the toothsome dish he has planned; it's similar to one he cooked as exec chef at the restaurant.

"It's made with great ingredients, not complicated, just honoured for what they are."

It will undoubtedly be among many of the meal's highlights, since the remaining courses will be cooked by chefs Scott Baechler, Chris Mills, Ray Henry and Dino Renaerts, along with current executive chef Quang Dang.

Former executive pastry chef Thomas Haas will be responsible for the dessert course and former restaurant chef Andrew Springett will be responsible for canapés served during the reception prior to dinner. As a further nod to the restaurant's past, Diva's original restaurant manager, John Blakeley, will be back on the floor welcoming guests as they arrive. Master of Ceremonies for the evening will be CTV's Coleen Christie.

Tickets for Div[a]ine Evolution are \$280 per person plus taxes, including a pre-dinner reception, seven-course dinner, all wine pairings, entertainment and gratuities, with net proceeds of ticket sales going to Big Brothers of Great Vancouver. A silent auction benefiting the charity will also be held during the reception.

Tickets are available now by calling 604-602-7759. Guests attending the dinner who wish to stay overnight can book a room at the Metropolitan Hotel Vancouver at a special rate of \$145, plus applicable taxes, by calling 604-643-7261.

If you want to plan in advance for your next visit to Calgary, the website for Notable is www.notabletherestaurant.ca.

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