



Restaurant check: Drake One Fifty, Toronto

Thursday, January 7, 2016 by Jenny Southan

BACKGROUND

Since local hotelier Jeff Stober opened “hotbed of culture” the Drake hotel in Toronto’s quirky West Queen West district in 2004, he has expanded his lifestyle-focused empire to country retreat Drake Devonshire, Drake General Store (both bricks-and-mortar and pop-up versions), and restaurant Drake One Fifty.

(For more on the Drake’s expansion plans, subscribers can read my feature on Toronto [here](#).)

It’s worth mentioning that the group has nothing to do with Torontonion rapper Drake, who opened his own upscale restaurant on King Street last autumn called Fring’s (perhaps because “Drake” was already taken).

THE RESTAURANT

Located at 150 York Street, in the Financial District, Drake One Fifty made its arrival in 2013. Taking over an expansive industrial space at the base of a shiny 1980s tower block, its interiors were transformed by renowned London-based designer Martin Brudnizki.



A coup for the Drake to secure, Brudnizki is huge in the English capital, with his studio responsible for the décor of Le Caprice, the Dean Street House, the Ivy and Sexy Fish in Mayfair, which was unveiled at the end of last year, to much applause.

For a restaurant located in the heart of the business district, populated with suits and ties, Drake One Fifty has managed to infuse a blast of cool into the area, without upsetting any bankers.



It's not a gimmicky kind of place, although there is some surreal-looking artwork to be found that changes every year – from hand-painted murals inside a booth at the back, to a display of red and white dolls hanging behind glass in the entrance (contemporary artist LA Gary Baseman is responsible for these).



Arranged in different sections, near the front is an oval-shaped marble bar where you can sit on high chairs. Beyond are leather Chesterfield banquettes in scarlet, lime and turquoise, Scandi lamps, a mix of hardwood and marble tabletops, geometric floor tiles and a cork covered ceiling. At the back is an open kitchen. In total it seats 125 people and can be hired for private functions.



What makes Drake One Fifty work is its mid-century eclectic design and warm, buzzing atmosphere. It's not a restaurant that takes itself too seriously (there's a vintage photo booth for lovers of the old-school self-portrait), but you are ensured high quality food, drink, service and even music (there are regular DJ sets).

If you are intending to meet with clients, it might get a bit loud in the evenings, especially after 9pm.

THE DRINKS

I'm always pleased to find local tipples listed – Drake One Fifty has a generous selection of Ontario-brewed beers, from Toronto's very own Steamwhistle to the Stranger than Fiction Porter from Hamilton, for example.

Its cocktail menu (divided into Sours and Sippers, Long and Flavourful, Straight Spirited Stirs) are attributed to the bartenders that made them. For the name alone I wanted to drink the Bowie Knife (Beefeater gin, rose sparkling, lemon juice, syrup) but instead went for the Rum Diary (one of my favourite books by Hunter S Thompson).



This combined Flor de Cana rum with calvados, Amaro Nonino Quintessentia, five spice syrup, lime juice, Angostura and ginger beer. I am convinced it would have gone down very nicely on a beach in Puerto Rico. Prices range from CA\$14-16 (£6.80-£7.80).

The sommelier had fun choosing the labels for the wine menu – there’s a Fat Banker Chardonnay from Niagara, a Dead Bolt from California, a Foreign Affair “Temptress” (also from Niagara) and a Borgogno “No Name” from Italy. About 20 wines are available by the glass, along with roughly 30 white and 50-plus reds by the bottle (both New and Old World).

I ordered, without regret, a glass of 2013 pinot noir from the Pinot Project in California (CA\$17/£8.30). Light on tannins with pleasing smoke and cherry, it didn’t compete for attention as I had a long-overdue catch up with my friend, JLR.

THE FOOD

It was a Friday night and it was my first time at Drake One Fifty, whereas JLR is a regular, stopping to say hi to people she knew on the way over to our table. Printed on sheets of raw, unbleached paper, I examined the dishes arranged informally into sections, not obvious as to which were starters or mains or simply plates to share.

It’s the kind of libertine establishment that doesn’t care for tired old conventions, though, and our waiter was only too happy to give enthusiastic recommendations and descriptions to guide me through my evening’s eating.

Being vegetarian, he encouraged me to try the mushroom porridge made with steel-cut oats and topped with an egg, saying not enough people order it as it sounds like breakfast but that it is actually more like a risotto.



Torn, I instead went for the rustic buckwheat pasta with hen of the woods mushrooms, black walnuts and sage, which was suitably autumnal (the Drake’s menus change seasonally) and was surprisingly moreish in its garlicky wholesomeness.



This was preceded by a baby gem and endive salad, dressed in a tirelessly tasty creamy Romaine dressing, Parmesan and toasted broken hazelnuts. (I tried to replicate this at home it was so good.) JLR, meanwhile, started with the beef tartare with pickled beans, shallots and grated foie gras.



Describing itself as Canadian brasserie-style cooking, none of the dishes we tried were entirely straight-forward – there was always something that took them from the predictable to the inspired. The ingredients were fresh, combinations imaginative, flavours punchy. It's food you can pick up with your hands, cut in two and share, wolf down when you're hungry or savour on a date.



Other options included the Drake One Fifty aged short rib burger with Perth bacon, Cheddar, Russian dressing and red onion on a milk bun; a Hawaiian pizza with smoked ham, pineapple and jalapeno; Nonna's meatballs in hand-milled tomato sauce, and roasted Brussels sprouts with chicken skin and maple Sriracha (Brits don't know how to cook sprouts the way North Americans do). You'll also find rabbit pot pie, balsamic hen, blackened bream and suckling pig.



Groups can order “big food” for four to six people if they order 48 hours in advance – there’s a seafood tower, fried chicken or bone in rib-eye roast. You can read the whole winter menu [here](#).

THE SERVICE

The service in Toronto tends to be very good – they have it down to an art. At Drake One Fifty, your server will introduce themselves by name, bring you iced water and ask if you have any questions, as standard. They can talk eloquently about every dish you want to know about, but are honest if it’s one they haven’t tried. Everyone I encountered was confident and personable. Tip generously.

VERDICT

Drake One Fifty is going to be a restaurant I will return to on future visits to the city. Its clientele is diverse but popular with businesspeople, it’s upmarket but convivial, and the location convenient for anyone in town on business.

- **OPENING HOURS** Lunch 11.30am-2.30pm, dinner 5pm-10pm. Snacks Mon-Wed 2.30pm-5pm, 10pm-11pm; Thurs-Sat 10pm-12am.
- **PRICES** Starters CA\$9-18 (£4.40-£8.75), mains CA\$19-44 (£9.20-£21.40).
- **CONTACT** Drake One Fifty, 150 York Street, Toronto; tel +1 416 36 36 150; drakeonefifty.ca/dining

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