



Pearl Bar & Dining

Formed the usual way

Pearls are formed when an irritating object causes the host to create a lustrous, layered gem. In this case, the host is Bellevue and the irritating object seemed to be Trader Vic's. And now the newly-formed Pearl is here, "reflecting light evenly and efficiently without glitter or sparkle" (dictionary definition). "Without glitter or sparkle" is meant as a compliment—the interior is fashionable without the bling.



The Pearl concept can be seen throughout, beginning outside. Lighting that changes hues is reminiscent of mother-of-pearl. A teardrop glass sculpture inside the front door is repeated in a light fixture over a semi-private table in back. A feeling of layers is clear in the lounge with varied-height tables, bar and a conversation area with couches. Silver paint along the ceiling line reflects light without being gaudy. Sheer fabric curtains offer some privacy in several spots (tip: get one of those tables and people will wonder just who you are). The bar is made from a 50 million-year-old stone from Massachusetts.

Two private rooms use those same sheers and also have heavy curtains to be drawn for more privacy. The larger room (25-30) has a flat screen TV and is wired for Internet use. This room when opened can easily feel part of the restaurant and be used for overflow dining or a private party that uses half the restaurant. The smaller room (8-10) can be used for larger parties instead of moving tables together in the main room. The table in this room is also made from the same stone seen in the bar.



Photo above: small private dining room



The beautiful arched ceiling and cherry wood throughout work well with the understated upholstery, and a wall built down the middle of the room offers a more booth-like feel to tables in the main room. A nice touch is the chef's table right in front of the open kitchen. U-shaped, it seats eight for a fun evening of watching the kitchen activity and maybe having a few special tastes slipped to the table. It's also used as a communal table.

Photo above courtesy of Pearl: chef's table

Owners Bradley Dickinson (Executive Chef/Managing Partner) and Mikel Rogers (Managing Partner) have plenty of combined experience in the restaurant industry. Bradley spent years with Schwartz Brothers. Mikel has been in and out of Schwartz Brothers while also working with Rossellini's The Other Place, Carmine's, as well as a few hotel chains. Between the two, they have the bases covered. "We're our own marketing team, Mikel is A/P and I'm HR," laughs Bradley. "Mikel's expertise is in the front of the house and mine is in the back, but we cross over. Mikel has a keen eye and we make suggestions to each other. We've developed a great management team."

Photo below: Brad Dickinson (left) and Mikel Rogers (right)

They knew each other over the years at previous jobs, but have worked side-by-side for the last five. Important to both of them is to have a team that works collaboratively. "We've developed a couple of our signature dishes by taking suggestions from our lead cooks," says Bradley. Listening to others is key. "We're creating a culture where people feel valued," explains Mikel. "Even if at the end of the day we need to make a decision that doesn't make everyone happy, at least they know we heard them. Our staff is our family."



In Seattle's food community, it's almost a sport to figure out what's right and wrong with a place even before the owners have a chance to settle in. Brad and Mikel are aware of what some people see as a location problem (out of sight from the main street). "We actually think this is a great location," says Bradley. "We're directly across from the Westin Hotel, downstairs from Microsoft, in the middle of Bellevue neighborhoods and in the perfect place to catch late-night crowds. The problem we see is that it needs to stand out more. That's why we've added the lighting outside—it's like a bug lamp to draw people in. We also have non-tinted windows on the outside, so people can see in."

Parking can be an issue. Sometimes parking is easily found at Bellevue Square and Lincoln Square, but at times the line to get in the garage can back out onto the street. "We knew valet parking would be critical," says Mikel. "We joined up with the service

that provides the hotel valet. Our guests simply walk across the driveway. Right now it's complimentary. Depending on negotiations, we may have to charge something, but we'll keep it below market value." In addition, they validate parking in the Lincoln Square garage.

And, naturally, there is the food discussion. "We had a vision of what we wanted to do—market- and season-driven food," explains Bradley. "We know what we can get locally and what we can't. We love that being owners we can make decisions more fluidly, so if a forager comes in with wild mushrooms, they can be on the menu that same night." As Mikel acknowledges, everyone wants to label restaurants. "We started out with a paragraph about our food," he laughs. "Then it went to a sentence and then to two words—contemporary Northwest." They both know from experience that a menu needs to have something on it for everyone. If it doesn't, people go elsewhere.

Their wine list falls into line with their concept—primarily local. "Percentage-wise," says Mikel, "about 70-75 percent is Washington, 15 percent is Oregon/California and the rest is worldwide. There are great winemakers right here and we want to support them. Our wine list offers reasonably-priced wines—they're not all high end. I know when we go out for dinner, I look for value. It's dinner, it's not always a special occasion. I'd much rather have people buy a less expensive wine and come back more often than eat here just once a month."

Overall, they're not worried about opening in a slow economic time. "If we provide great food, great service and a great room, we'll be fine. That's what we're focused on," says Mikel. Response has already been good from the hotel, businesses and neighbors. "We had about 20 tables filled the other night and everyone knew each other," Bradley says. Local software moguls, sports figures and local celebrities have already been in to check the restaurant out. The lounge scene is taking shape. "We get very distinct crowds at 6, 9 and 11," says Mikel. "It has exceeded our expectations."

Cultured and timeless, this pearl will be burnished to perfection by the team. And who knows? Maybe it will be the start of a string of pearls.

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Connie Adams/December 2008