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Rush worth the wait

Latest offering from the Vintage Group will be the place to be seen this fall

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When Lance Hurtubise signed the lease to develop a new restaurant in the old downtown post office, he didn't plan on an opening date almost 31/2 years away.

So, naming the new place Rush seems an almost tongue-in-cheek acknowledgment of how long it took to be born. But Rush and Hurtubise aren't alone. The new entrance and pavilion expansion for Royal Canadian Pacific's historic trains has just opened next door to Rush at 201 9th Ave. S.W. It was meant to open for the 2007 tourist season. (Or was it 2006?) Such is the state of construction in Calgary.

But now the freshly christened Penn West Plaza (a.k.a. the old post office) is almost complete and Rush (207 9th Ave. S.W., 403-271-7874) is open. It is quite the new place.

Rush is the latest effort from the Vintage Group, the folks who own Vintage Chophouse and the three Redwater Rustic Grilles. Rush is meant to be their top-end place, their signature restaurant. To achieve the look, tone and taste of Rush, the owners, senior chefs and management travelled to New York and Las Vegas to check out the latest and greatest trends. They then worked with Hribar Design to incorporate them into Rush.

The result is a huge, high-ceilinged see-and-be-seen room, with 80 seats in the dining room, an additional 120 in the lounge and private dining for groups up to 28. Many seats are at large curved booths under immense lampshades. There's also a chef's table for eight in the kitchen where you can watch all the action.

And there's a lot of action back there to watch. Every bell and whistle a chef could dream of has been installed. The Montague Company out of California has built much of the kitchen equipment, and there is not just one but four sous vide cookers, including a sous vide chamber that can prepare entire legs of lamb and such. A complete bakery has been set up for baker Lisa Cheah, formerly of Charlie's Bakery in Kensington.

In total, 17 kitchen staff answer to executive chef Justin Leboe. He's a Vancouver lad who has cooked across the western world at places such as

Daniel in New York and The Inn at Little Washington in Virginia. He's studied under Thomas Keller and was most recently at a Relais et Chateau in the Bahamas. He's been on the Vintage staff for over a year and a half, overseeing the Rush kitchen development while lending a hand at the other Vintage restaurants.

Leboe calls his menu modern North American, meaning classic European technique and global ingredients shaped for the North American palate. So you'll find king salmon with a chorizo emulsion, watermelon and crab ravioli, lamb chops with sheep ricotta tortellini and a fricassee of lobster with sweet peas. The ingredients are as fresh and local as possible, with almost everything made in-house, including breads, pastas, and cured meats.

Rush even makes its own water. That's right, no imported, bottled water here. Rush has installed Canada's first FRESH water purification system. Developed in Sweden, FRESH transforms tap water into an ultra-pure, "well-tasting" beverage. For those who like it bubbly, it even has a carbonation option. Plus sleek bottles that look great on the table. Eau de Bow never tasted so good.

Out front, Ian Cowley, another former Vancouverite, fills the role of general manager and local sommelier Marnie Harfield handles the viniferous duties. Harfield has collected a long and diverse wine list that should have Rush collecting a bunch of wine awards in short order. In addition, Rush has 30 private wine lockers available for those who want to keep their own selections on hand.

One of the more interesting aspects of Rush is how they have set up their menus. The lounge menu is a la carte, with lists of both small and large plates. It's a straightforward menu that has a flat iron steak and a beef burger with morel mushroom ragout, topping it out at \$18.

But the dining room menu is different. It's done as prix fixe selections -- at weekday lunches, two courses cost \$30 while three are \$38. At dinner Monday through Saturday, it's three courses (appetizer, main, dessert) for \$75, or a chef's five-course tasting menu at \$85. Both come with suggested wine pairings.

Alternatively, it's possible to order individual dishes, but the menus, at least on opening day, had no individual prices listed. It will be interesting to see the response to that.

Whether folks choose to dine in the lounge or the dining room, Rush will be the hot place to check out this fall. After 31/2 years in the works it should be worth a visit, even if just for a glass of water.

One more note on the Vintage Group. Following the opening of their third Redwater Rustic Grille in Bow Valley Square (250 6th Ave. S.W.) earlier this year, the attached Rise Bakery & Cafe (403-265-7766) has come on stream. Operating in the main floor concourse of Bow Valley Square, Rise is open Monday through Friday from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. and provides fresh-baked breads and baked goods, sandwiches, soups, salads and coffee. The focus is

organic, sustainable and eco-friendly, as well as fresh.

Baker Whitney Armstrong, formerly of the Urban Baker, and partner Trevor Hunter handle the duties at the shop.

John Gilchrist reviews restaurants for CBC Radio One. His Cheap Eats guide to Calgary and area restaurants is available in book stores and specialty food shops. He can be reached at escorial@telus.net or 235-7532.

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