

If music be the food of love ...

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By KATHLEEN ROBINSON

Wow! (Note the exclamation mark. In my business, we don't use them often.)

The Big Band Brunch at the Ironwood Stage and Grill is amazing. I had no idea Calgary had something like that.

I heard Ironwood Grill had a jazz brunch, so when I invited Andrea and Ingrid to join me there, I expected a few instruments playing in the background while we ate.

Was I ever wrong. And being wrong never sounded so good.

The Prime Time Big Band is an incredibly talented ensemble of musicians committed to preserving the big band genre. Calgary is blessed to have them. In fact, Prime Time is the only big band in Canada with regular performance dates.

From the first time I heard Glen Miller or rock bands such as Chicago, with a big horn sound, I have been a fan. I could write a whole column waxing poetic about the music that earned the Ironwood such a great score for ambience.

But I should devote a few words to the food.

The entranceway to the Ironwood Grill is so unprepossessing, I thought I had the wrong door, but inside it's kind of funky and cosy with a scuffed hardwood floor, a bar to the left, a stage angled into a corner, tables tightly packed and lamps like old-fashioned street lights.

Our very engaging server explained brunch begins with a menu selection made fresh and delivered to your table. Then you visit the buffet to round out your meal.

There was eggs benedict with back bacon or smoked salmon. I went with the vegetarian version — I love meat, but the combination of grilled portobello mushrooms and marinated artichokes sounded delicious, and it was.

The two eggs were poached perfectly in big round spheres that stayed intact even when one went rolling around on my plate.

But when I poked each with my fork, they burst in a most satisfying way with hot, runny yolk. The ample mushroom and artichoke were both lightly fried and delicious, and the hollandaise was smooth, rich and piquant.

The scrambles choices included a bacon, spinach and Jack cheese combo, or goat's cheese with basil and sun-dried tomato.

Andrea opted for the ice shrimp version, with green onion and tomatoes.

"You can really taste the shrimp," she said. "Every time you take a bite, there is a shrimp in it.

"The tomato is nice and firm and the eggs are done just right. I would like a bit more spice, but then I always want more spice than most people."

You can also get two eggs prepared any style, or the daily special.

Ingrid went with the special and was served slow-cooked bison with mushrooms and carrots served on roasted potatoes.

"It's very spicy with lots of pepper," she said. "It leaves that peppery

taste on your tongue for a long time. And you can taste the bison, that tinge of wild, which I like."

The buffet is abbreviated, but has a nice range. My favourite item was a salad made of broccoli, red pepper, red onions and feta cheese in a creamy dressing.

"It's nice and fresh," said Ingrid. "And they are generous with the feta."

The fruit salad was large chunks of pineapple, cantaloupe, honey-melon and grapes — all fresh and tasty.

There were also hot roasted potatoes. I scooped down to the bottom of the dish and got a nice serving of onions and red peppers with mine.

There were two kinds of sausage. Andrea tried the smaller ones. "They look like hotdogs, but they taste like a maple breakfast sausage. It's very good." Ingrid tried the other: "This one's not sweet. It's a nice mild pork."

Ingrid also tried one of the croissants and wasn't thrilled. So I took a bite and found it was light and fluffy. "What are you, some kind of croissant snob?" I demanded. "I like them fresh from the oven," she replied. So we agreed to disagree on that one.

Next, we hit the dessert selections. My favourite was a light carrot cake square with a smattering of crushed nuts on top. Ingrid sided with the Nanaimo bars. But Andrea staunchly defended her cinnamon bun as the best.

"It's almost like a cake, layered with icing, and the cinnamon goes through the whole thing. It is very, very good."

As we finished up, more and more musicians kept assembling on the stage:

Four saxophones, five trumpets, four trombones, a keyboard, bass, drums, guitar.

We were right at the front and soon enveloped in the fabulous, rich and evocative sound of tunes such as On Green Dolphin Street, featuring a magnificent trumpet section. Shari Chaskin added powerful vocals with an impressive range demonstrated by her big finish for Deedle's Blues.

Dave Jones does admirable triple duty as conductor, emcee and trumpet section fill-in.

And Pat Belliveau's gorgeous tenor sax solos highlight many pieces.

Both Andrea and Ingrid were impressed enough to snap up copies of Prime Times's CD. Ironwood Grill deserves major kudos for showcasing such great talent, both in the kitchen and on stage.

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4 out of 5 stars

AMBIENCE
4 1/2 out of 5 stars

SERVICE
4 out of 5 stars

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