



## DESTINATION: KELOWNA

Chef Rod Butters of RauDZ Regional Table.

by Jennifer Cockrall-King

“I’ve always preferred to be out in front of the pack, not behind it,” explains chef Rod Butters about his habit of reinventing himself whenever he seems to be at the top of his game. Each incarnation is a radical departure from the last. In 2001, Butters and Audrey Surrao (Butters’s business partner) brought elegant fine dining to an otherwise culinary-bereft Kelowna with their restaurant Fresco. Despite having their “best year to date in 2008,” recalls Butters, they announced that they would close Fresco after New Year’s Eve. Butters and Surrao spent a year and a half looking for a suitable space for a second restaurant that would focus on regional cuisine in the Okanagan Valley; however, after a fruitless search, the pair ultimately decided on converting Fresco. For three months, they furiously demolished the interior and rebuilt everything from the restaurant layout to the menu and even the name. Only the address of the red-brick heritage building (originally built circa 1912) in downtown Kelowna stayed the same.

In March 2009, the doors of RauDZ Regional Table swung open to reveal a 6.5-metre, 125-year-old reclaimed pine communal dining table anchoring the 90-seat room. Nothing has really changed since opening day. A large chalkboard with cheeky quotes—food related and otherwise—hangs over the central, open kitchen. Reservations are not taken (though exceptions are made for groups of between eight and 20). The wine list is fiercely British Columbian. Local

microbrews and local spirits are promoted. The menu is a stripped-down love letter to the organic, regional fruits, vegetables, cheeses, and meats of the Okanagan Valley and the B.C. Interior. Select West Coast seafood and Fraser Valley products also fit the regional focus. Butters’s gamble was that diners were ready to trade in fine dining for a more relaxed and intensely regional, ingredient-focused experience. Let’s just say that his colleagues didn’t induct him into the B.C. Restaurant Hall of Fame in 2007 for playing it safe. (Butters was in good company that year, joining Robert Clark of C Restaurant and Pierre Dubrulle of Dubrulle Culinary Arts.)

Yet Butters’s story—the one that led him to blaze a culinary trail in Kelowna—might not have happened but for an injury that derailed his potential professional baseball career. Butters was “a pretty good ball player,” he says modestly; good enough, it turns out, that he was offered a baseball scholarship to Indiana State University, but an injured right arm forced him to switch tracks. Food was also a long-standing passion, so he channelled his discipline and drive into cooking.

Butters, who was born in Port Coquitlam, B.C., built his resumé with early stints at Scaramouche and the Four Seasons Toronto, and then he returned west, working his way up the restaurant hierarchy at the Four Seasons Vancouver and the Fairmont Chateau Whistler (or, as the hotel was called in 1989, the Canadian Pacific Chateau Whistler),

where he was the executive sous chef of the opening team. In the mid-1990s, when Butters was in his early 30s, he was again asked to be part of an opening team, this time as chef de cuisine at the Pointe Restaurant at the Wickaninnish Inn in Tofino. It was a chance to make his mark, and Butters didn’t disappoint. He put the Wick on the international culinary map, and the hotel was invited to join the prestigious handful of other Relais & Châteaux properties in Canada. “That was kind of a crown jewel,” Butters admits, smiling.

But running such a high-profile restaurant took its toll. Butters needed time away to recharge and rediscover the world beyond the

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walls of hotel kitchens. So he took off, along with Surrao, on what would end up being a 16-month globe-trotting adventure. The day after they returned to Canada in 2000, Butters received two job offers from major hotels courting him to run their kitchens, but Butters knew that he didn’t want to go back to that familiar territory. “Audrey [Surrao] and I had a whole notebook of ideas from our year of traveling,” he says. “We’re very entrepreneurial. We decided, if we’re going to work, let’s work for ourselves.”

Butters saw the potential of the Okanagan wine industry clustered around Kelowna. He also knew good ingredients when he saw them. Orchards, farms, and ranches were a given, but Butters’s radar also picked up on the handful of artisanal food producers who were starting to emerge in the valley.

“I’ve lost count, but I think we have over 150 small regional suppliers now,” says Butters, proud of the fact that RauDZ is a link in the food chain that starts in orchards and on farms in the valley and ends up on plates in his restaurant. His philosophy—“support local, buy local, eat and drink local”—pervades the restaurant. From the start, 80 per cent of the ingredients, wines, and other beverages on offer were from local suppliers. (“There’s still some Bordeaux in the cellar from Fresco’s days, however,” he says.)

Butters often sends out messages via his Twitter feed and on RauDZ’s Facebook page about a particularly exciting delivery of heirloom vegetables, or special seasonal menus inspired by a certain tomato or plum that is in season. He also tours various farms and interviews his favourite growers and farmers on his wildly popular video podcast, *Home Plate*.

“I feel good that when customers come here, they’re not just supporting me—they’re supporting *them*,” Butters says, pointing at the artwork on the walls. The large-format photographs scattered around the dining room include images of Butters’s key suppliers and winemakers, and exquisite close-ups of local ingredients. There’s a black-and-white portrait of weather-wizened Jon Alcock of nearby Sunshine Farms, where Butters gets his incredible heirlooms, organic golden beets, multi-hued carrots, herbs, and blossoms. There’s a photo of Monika Walker, a young, photogenic artisan baker who bakes throughout the night for her selected restaurant clients and the customers of her closet-sized Okanagan Grocery Artisan Breads retail store. And there’s legendary Okanagan winemaker Howard Soon leaning to check a barrel sample in Sandhill’s aging cellar.

Butters confirms that he’s never cooked in a more exciting place than the Okanagan. Products and raw ingredients for which he used to “spend a fortune on freight” are now “just down the street.” Take the Ultimate Greens terrine of local chèvre, walnuts, beets, and plum

vinaigrette, or the Wild Boar Rigatoni made with Enderby-raised boar, cured ham, peas, and a roasted garlic cream. And he makes the most of the abundance of summer, which, in the Okanagan, borders on obscene. There’s a constant frenzy of canning and preserving at RauDZ throughout the growing season, which keeps local flavours front and centre throughout the year. (Butters’s custom “rjb” preserves are available for purchase, and include spiced balsamic Bing cherries, ultra-intense blackberry and tomato ketchup, summer-in-a-jar peach and blueberry chutney, and “Simply the Best” pickles.)

Right now, Butters is most excited by the raging success of the restaurant’s “field-to-glass” bar program. “We simply took our field-to-plate concept and applied it to the bar,” he says.

Gerry Jobe, RauDZ’s liquid chef, is Butters’s counterpart at the bar. “I ooze passion, but this guy is incredible,” Butters says. Jobe’s creations include fresh-squeezed tomato juice and local herbs that go into the midsummer Okanagan Bloody Mary. (Jobe

often makes trips to local farms and orchards to discover new ingredients for his signature Okanagan cocktails.) The daily drinks list on the blackboard is a good indicator of what is in season; apricot sangria, savoury herb-infused summer martinis, cherrywood-smoked local peppers in smoked margaritas in the fall, and the “winterized” apple-chestnut spiced rum cocktail are just a few examples. Jobe even started running popular Liquid Sundays cocktail classes at the bar, and for the past year, he has increased their customers’ cocktail literacy (and enjoyment) immeasurably.

With the afternoon winding down, it’s time for the doors to open for the nightly dinner service. The pace in the restaurant is quickening, and I can tell Butters is anxious to make sure his kitchen is ready. He does a quick tour of the kitchen stations, conveys a few pre-service beads of wisdom, and takes his spot at the nexus of the kitchen stations looking out into the dining room. Despite the frenzy, Butters always looks relaxed as he chats with regulars who come up to the kitchen to say hello.

These are the rewards for risks he’s taken. When Butters opened RauDZ Regional Table, his knife-sharp instincts told him that diners wanted an ingredient-driven local food experience without the fuss that normally surrounds a trip to a quality restaurant. Turns out he was right. Again. For now, at least, he’s very much at home at the front of the field-to-plate movement in the heart of Okanagan wine country. ☎

