

BROCK'S BANTER: Pleasure and Pain

By Brock Weir

It takes a lot to get me out of bed before 7 a.m. on a Sunday.

Thankfully, the Olympic Gold Medal hockey games only happen once every four years and the kind people who scheduled the games this year put the women's final at a much more fan-friendly time.

Nevertheless, it seemed almost unpatriotic ? okay, downright unpatriotic ? not to get up with my fellow countrymen and women to share in a nail biter.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, if you thrive on drama (or happen to be Scandinavian. Or American. You know who you are) it didn't turn out to be a decisive victory but that did nothing to dampen the enthusiasm at places such as King Richard's English Pub and Jonathan's Restaurant on Sunday morning.

Nevertheless, after their female counterparts delivered perhaps the most exciting hockey game since the Men's Gold Medal round in Vancouver four years ago, it might have been a bit anticlimactic.

Thursday's Gold Medal game between the Canadian and American women's teams is one I will never forget.

People often say you can't know pleasure without knowing pain and, although it might sound rather dramatic, that is exactly what was in store for a number of us media outlets that afternoon.

Tearing ourselves away from our respective TVs, radios, and computer screens covertly carrying the game while spicing up an otherwise humdrum workday, representatives from The Auroran (me), snap'd Aurora, the York Region Media Group, and a relative newcomer to the scene, WhiStle Radio 102.7 FM serving Stouffville, headed over to Aw, Shucks! at the invitation of the restaurant to put our taste buds to the test.

We were invited to put our considerable expertise as food tasters (I'm certainly not complaining!) back into action, tasting three dishes whipped up by Chef Grant Robertson to be one of the main dishes served at Mardi Gras for Southlake, which takes over the restaurant for the first time next Saturday, March 1.

Heading across the street from The Auroran office, it was with a sense of defeat. After all, the US was leading Canada 1 ? 0 midway through the third. Not much can happen at that point, right?

What was in store for us once we got there was a feast ? and a feast for the eyes.

The first dish up for grabs was a seafood gumbo on a bed of rice containing, in the words of Mr. Robertson, ?the holy trinity of onions, peppers and celery slow-cooked in a seafood stock [of] crab meat, shrimp and oysters?, which are all local to the Gulf Region.

As I raised a non-smoked oyster to my lips for the very first time, there was a commotion from the bar area. While savouring each and every morsel of the gumbo, those of us facing west in the restaurant had the benefit of a TV far off in the distance. You couldn't see much, but looking up, a cluster of black and red on the ice indicated something exciting was happening. Canada was finally on the board ? and I now felt more comfortable tackling the gumbo with gusto.

Next up was a duck etouffe, a dish which resembled a very colourful variety of stew.

?It's a roasted duck and you take the meat off the carcass, make a stock out of it, thicken it with a dark roux of flour and butter and it also has the holy trinity ? a bit of a kick, but not too much,? pitched Mr. Robinson.?

By this time, the women had tied things up, and another little cheer wafted in from the bar. The duck would have to wait. We gathered in front of the TV dangling from the ceiling to take in the instant replay. Miraculously, after tying up the game, the Canadian women pulled through in overtime.

After the pain of the early American lead, followed by the pain of being able to make out the faint images on the screen but not truly knowing what the hell was going on, and the pain of knowing that just about every other Canadian was glued to their hockey delivery system of choice gave way to the euphoria of the win, and ultimately, the euphoria of the food in front of us. Now we could truly relax and get on with our judging duties.

Next up in the taste challenge was a fried catfish on a bed of jambalaya, containing sausage and, again, the holy trinity. As a jambalaya enthusiast from way back, I have to say I was a novice at cat fish, having thrown many of them back into Lake Simcoe in my day, but never having the chance to make a meal out of one.

Late to the party once again, but I was pleasantly surprised that those ugly little critters could have so much flavour.

All in all, it was a tough choice, but my vote ultimately came down to the duck etouffe which had everything going for it ? it was smoky, sweet and spicy, not unlike pulled pork, and with a little extra crunch from a few pieces of fried duck skin on top.

Ultimately, my fellow media reps agreed, and the dish was ultimately ? and almost unanimously ? crowned the winner of the challenge.

Now, this Saturday, you can have your chance to taste our selection at the Mardi Gras for Southlake ? and given the wealth of epicurean delights that came out of that kitchen last Thursday, I can't wait to see what else they have in store. Although, given the flack I received last November for including a photo of the Baby Back Ribs display from Aurora's Haunted Forest, I might have to give the carnival king cake, complete with a little baby doll prize baked into it, a pass.

More excitement, however, happened over the lunch hour on the following afternoon as the men took on the Americans in the semi-final game. As we all recover from Sunday, we all know how that turned out. But, again, I am happy this happens only every four years. As someone who wouldn't otherwise give a second thought to the NHL (I look forward to your letters), it is almost disconcerting to be bitten by the Olympic bug and be struck down with hockey fever ? but, as a Canadian, my recessive hockey gene is bound to kick in at inconvenient moments!