

# Quilicum

## *A West Coast Indian Restaurant*

BY PRISCILLA HEWITT

**Q**uilicum is chinook for “return of the people.” When you have experienced the exquisite cuisine of Quilicum, a West Coast Indian restaurant at 1724 Davie Street, Vancouver, you comprehend more fully the meaning of this phrase. This restaurant, formerly known as the Muckamuck, has undergone some interesting changes in the past few years, the best of which has been the change of ownership. It is presently run by Bonnie Thorne of the Nuu-chah-nulth nation from Vancouver Island. She is assisted by her husband, Art Bolton, a Tsimshian.

Prior to managing the Quilicum, Bonnie had been in the restaurant business for fifteen years, part of that time training staff in the restaurant which operated out of the Vancouver Indian Centre. She had experienced the highs and lows of running a restaurant and vowed to herself that if she ever worked in a restaurant again, it was going to be for herself. Little did she know that the opportunity was going to present itself when the Muckamuck became involved in a labour dispute.

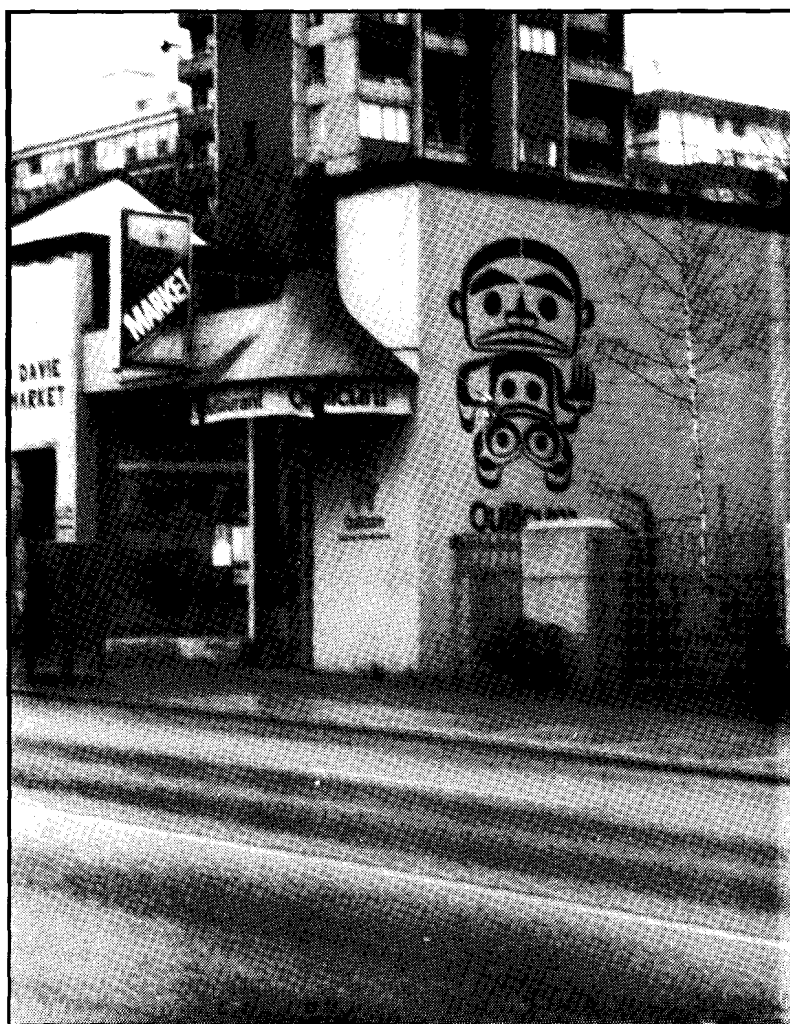
When the dispute was not resolved favourably, the Muckamuck closed its doors and was up for sale. Bonnie and Art then tapped all of their sources to see if they could make a go of things. Family was most helpful: a brother even assisted with the sanding and painting. There were safety and health requirements that had to be met for the City and, for what seemed like quite a while,

they just plodded along working steadily to put the place back in order.

And it was time well spent: the interior is the epitome of Native design reminiscent of the Longhouse. The walls are made from cedar poles split lengthwise and placed side-by-side. They have been sanded and varnished to a shiny finish. Large cedar poles left intact, but similarly sanded and varnished are placed strategically to act as supports for the ceiling. Paintings and spirit masks, most of which have been done by Art, adorn the walls and

may be purchased. Pebbles and planks form the floor. At first glance, the tables give one the impression of a Japanese dining room as they appear so close to the floor. Upon investigation, you notice that the tops are hinged and you actually lift them up to seat yourself comfortably by sitting on the cushion and swinging your legs into a rectangular space below.

As you sit and peruse the menu, you are entertained by a background music of drums and chanting. The menu itself is a celebration of Native foods, including indigenous salads and soups, smoked oolichans, bannock, salmon, caribou, clam chowder, seawood, wild rice, whipped soapallie berries and cold raspberry soup, to name but a few items. Bonnie wanted to keep everything as close as possible to the old traditional ways; thus the food is fresh, natural herbs are used, and cooking is done



over an open alder fire. I was there at lunch hour, the day that staff and students of "Urban Images for Native Women," a training program, were having their graduation dinner. I couldn't help but feel that this was an excellent way to honour the students, as they had completed their program and were on their way into the work world to put into practice what they had learned. I decided to experiment with barbecued goat ribs with black currant sauce, wild rice, whipped soapallie berries (sometimes referred to as Indian ice-cream) and cold raspberry soup. My curious palate was amply rewarded.

When deciding what foods to offer, Bonnie says that they kept their specials to a minimum, so as to concentrate more fully on quality. Some of her network of women friends assist in this area and she has a select few local distributors who provide the rest of their supplies.

Bonnie and Art were an excellent hostess and host. As the restaurant was just beginning an experiment with being open during the lunch hour, they did not yet have staff scheduled to work these hours. Most of their business comes from tourists during the dinner and evening hours and from hosting special events. While they are attracting some local people, they are hoping to lure more into frequenting the premises. In keeping with the Native customs of sharing, strength, kindness and truth, Bonnie says they do not ask their staff to do anything that they themselves are not prepared to do. The impact of this is reflected in the fact that staff turnover is low and that, indeed, they have a

waiting list of people wanting to work at Quilicum.

They've also had an impressive list of customers. I read through the guestbook, which was full of superlatives such as "Great people, place and food" (a diner from Spain); "In Italy, we haven't anything as good as this food;" "I just came to Vancouver to try this restaurant" (a visitor from Mexico); and "Could compare with most famous French restaurant." As well, there were comments from guests from Finland, Austria, Sweden and Japan who had written compliments in their own language.

I asked Bonnie if she had any insights to share with Native women who may be interested in starting their own business. She said that they should be prepared for a lot of long hours, that they would really have to love the business they're contemplating, and that starting a business is very similar to having a baby in terms of time and energy. Bonnie and Art have managed a fine balance between family and business by having their children take an active role in the restaurant. Their 19-year old son sometimes cooks at the Quilicum on his days off and the older daughter has expressed an interest in chef's training. The younger daughter will occasionally help with washing the dishes.

I commend Bonnie and Art for their efforts. Again, in keeping with the Native perspective, they have managed to maximize the strengths of their individual selves, which in turn impacts on their family life and then has a positive effect on our community. Our people can be justifiably proud of their endeavours.

