



## Ivan Reitman's latest role is worth checking out: maître d' at his new restaurant Montecito

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Ivan Reitman was hard at work at his new downtown restaurant the other week, greeting customers, smiling for pictures with starstruck fans and shuttling between conversations at the prime corner tables.

The director Atom Egoyan held court at one of them with his back to the room, his angular face and fulsome eyebrows just discernible in the half-light. The party in the corner opposite was prodigiously tanned and blow-dried, as though they'd just stepped off a G550 from L.A. Mr. Reitman stopped to greet them; you could almost hear the rev and pop of brain cells as the rest of the room tried to place just who they were.

Mr. Reitman, the producer/director behind *Ghostbusters*, *Stripes*, *Meatballs*, *Up In The Air* (his son, Jason, directed that one) and *Trailer Park Boys: The Movie*, has become a maître d' – and he seems to be loving every second of it.

Better still, he's the maître d' of a pretty good restaurant. Although the California-themed Montecito, with seating for 330, an address on the same block as the TIFF Bell Lightbox (the land has been in the Reitman family since the 1960s), and an excess of Ivan Reitman movie memorabilia, is doubtless a vanity project, it's a vanity project done with intelligence and class. Montecito's atmosphere is comforting and surprisingly unpretentious: the room is as populist as the director's movies are.

The wine list is excellent (particularly the selection of hard-to-find grower Champagnes), the prices are reasonable. The floor staff are superbly well-trained.

The two-month-old space is also perhaps the most important stop this weekend on TIFF's red carpet party circuit: Montecito hosted the festival's opening gala after-party on Thursday and is largely booked out for other festival events into next week.

Yet, just as important, Montecito has an excellent chef behind it. Mr. Reitman and his partners, Tom and Jordan Bitove, brought on the New York chef Jonathan Waxman to oversee the food.

Mr. Waxman has made clear in interviews that he's a part-owner at the restaurant, and not its day-to-day chef. ("If people expect me to work the line at 63 years old they're [sexpletive deleted] out of their minds," he told Eater.com.) He's delegated the kitchen's heavy-lifting to the executive chef Matt Robertson, who was most recently in charge at Reds Midtown Tavern.

But Mr. Waxman's influence – his fondness for fresh, simple, comforting flavours, his respect for local ingredients, his no-fuss plating – is all over Montecito's menu. It's there in the deceptively straight-ahead salads made with not much more than delicate greens, a few shaved radishes and beets and a well-judged splash of oil and vinegar. It's there in the gorgeously crisp seared pickerel and the list of local produce and meat suppliers printed under the desserts selection, and especially in the roasted chicken, which is the chef's most famous dish.

Mr. Waxman helped to pioneer California cuisine at Chez Panisse in the 1970s; at the height of the Reagan years, he made a fortune – and a reputation as a hard-partying, Ferrari-driving bad boy – introducing West Coast cooking to New York. In 1984, the price for half of a roasted chicken at Mr. Waxman's Jams, on the Upper East Side, was \$24 a plate – that's \$55 when adjusted for inflation.

Time has humbled him; Mr. Waxman's empire, and much of his fame, blew up at the end of the 1980s. The chef spends most of his time these days at his Italian restaurant Barbuto, in New York's West Village. He still makes that chicken, and sells it far more cheaply than he did in the 1980s. The recipe travels well.

It's popular stuff at Montecito. The meat was crisp-skinned from grilling, moist and aggressively seasoned the first time I had it; a little less moist the second time but good nonetheless. (I would have loved a bit more of the salsa verde it comes with.) It tasted like something you might find at a barbecue hosted by a very good home cook.

I'd say that about a lot of Montecito's constantly-changing menu. It's restaurant food for people who get tired of eating in restaurants – people like downtown condo-dwellers, business lunchers, local art-house directors and visiting Hollywood types. Smart.

I had a superb wild-mushroom pizza one night that came on a crunchy, flavourful crust and was topped with sizzling shallots and fontina cheese – the smell alone was reason enough for raving. There were good meatballs (a reference to the 1979 Bill Murray movie, one presumes) on decadently creamy polenta; a decent fava bean bruschetta (it could have used more favas and more acidity, less bread); fantastic green salad; deep-golden fried potato hunks that were crisp and bubbly and topped with rosemary and pecorino.

The pickerel was a thing of beauty both times I tried it, moist, flaky and lacy-crustled, set on mashed potatoes that were spiked with dill and copious amounts of butter.

The tomato and mozzarella salad looked and tasted pedestrian; it wasn't ripe enough or creamy-milky enough or summery enough. (How does a kitchen screw up something so easy?)

Pastas were excellent, particularly a light and deftly seasoned seafood spaghetti. And if you've given up on onion rings because they're so often stringy and greasy, have the ones at Montecito, where the onions are sweet and melting and their molten shells shatter when you bite them. Even the house-ground burger was good, thick and juicy, notably heavy (it must have weighed close to half a pound), nicely seasoned, set on appropriately inconsequential bread.

Much has been made of the desserts at Montecito, particularly the "Stay Puft Marshmallow Man baked Alaska," a not-at-all-subtle reference to the *Ghostbusters* villain. Apart from the name it's just ordinary baked Alaska; I'm not convinced that Montecito's pastry department believes in ghosts.

The peach crostata was also disappointing, bready and unpeachy both times I tried it. The raspberry sorbet, however, was great.

Mr. Reitman has shown few signs that he's ready to give up his maitre d' duties – he's been at the restaurant every day since mid-August, one staffer told me, obsessing over the finishings and the lighting (to the man's credit: Montecito's lighting is soft and gorgeous; it's the rare Toronto restaurant with lighting that makes diners look better) and hobnobbing with the guests.

He'll be there much less once TIFF is over, it's safe to assume – *Ghostbusters III* is set to start shooting soon. But that's when you ought to get there. It's a good restaurant, worth a visit, whether filled with Hollywood types or not.