



Executive chef Ryan O'Donnell has developed an intriguing menu of comfort food, Asian and otherwise. **MERCER KITCHEN + BEER HALL + HOTEL**

MERCER IN STRATFORD TAKES CENTRE STAGE

Edgy establishment combines heritage inn, restaurant and beer hall



ROCHELLE LASH
Checking In

Mercer Kitchen + Beer Hall + Hotel is proof you don't have to be into Shakespeare to enjoy the southern Ontario town of Stratford.

Mercer is an edgy, super-hip enterprise that rocks Ontario St. — the main drag of one of Canada's most cultured, historic towns.

The inn consists of 14 rooms on the second and third floors, while the popular Beer Hall sells a staggering 140 kinds of suds. The Kitchen cooks up Canadian comfort food and Japanese-inspired pub fare.

I alighted for supper on a cosy Sunday night and lucked into a 1960s and '70s background music bonanza of Bob Dylan, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix and the Rolling Stones.

On Fridays, there is live music, mostly solo performers on guitar,

and occasionally DJs and bands like Toronto-based Enter the Haggis, a Celtic group.

Mercer is owned by locals Bill and Shelley Windsor, who also run The Prune, among Stratford's top dining spots.

Mercer beer: The Mercer takes beer seriously. Operations manager Alex Kastner has created one of the most comprehensive offerings of craft beer in Ontario.

The menu lists 15 draughts on tap and more than 120 bottled craft brews from Ontario and Quebec and as far away as Hawaii and Belgium. The place houses Stratford's only cask engine.

I indulged in a tasting of a Black Swan IPA from Stratford, a wheat beer from X Fabrica in Milan, Italy, and 12 Minutes to Destiny, an almost non-carbonated brew from Flying Monkeys Craft Brewery in Barrie, Ont.

To stay abreast, you might need the app Untappd, which updates the Mercer's choice of draughts daily.

Even though The Mercer is focused on beer, there are also wines and well-priced cocktails like Shiso Spiked Arnold with vodka and limoncello, and the

IF YOU GO

Mercer Kitchen + Beer Hall + Hotel: 888-816-4011, 519-271-9202, 519-271-1888, mercerhall.ca; 104-108 Ontario St., Stratford, Ont. **Price:** \$99-\$149, including in-room pod coffee, mini-fridge, private heat and AC, parking. Some rooms have whirlpool tub, fireplace. Packages available with dinner, drinks and spa/beauty treatments. **Kitchen & Beer Hall:** Mon.-Fri., full menu from 11 a.m. Sat.-Sun. brunch from 10 a.m. **Stratford Tourism:** 800-561-7926, visitstratford.ca. Stratford Festival: 888-567-1600, stratfordfestival.ca.

Maple n' Spice, with Sortilège whiskey and spiced rum.

Mercer food: Executive chef Ryan O'Donnell, who also handles The Prune, has developed an

intriguing, refreshingly different menu of comfort food, Asian and otherwise, in small, medium and full plates.

The rice bowls are varied: grilled mushroom with Thai basil, crispy beef with onions, or duck confit with cilantro. Other exotic dishes include a vegetable pancake, udon noodles, sushi rolls, steamed buns with pork and wagyu beef with tempura vegetables.

The Kitchen offers a choice of robust sauces — aioli, BBQ, honey-mustard, wasabi and chili.

Canadian favourites include buttermilk fried chicken, sweet potato fries, wings with honey-garlic sauce, steak-frites, fried fish and a chicken- and-brisket burger piled high with Gouda and bacon.

Perth County has a strong German heritage, and O'Donnell cooks up pigs' tails with potato slaw and schnitzel on a bun.

Brunch on weekends includes duck eggs, French toast pudding, steak 'n' eggs with chimichurri and Mercer pork hash with jalapeños.

Mercer rooms: The inn is a walk-up on the second and third floors. It is clean and homespun, in tones of beige with colourful and whimsical accents.

Each of the rooms is decorated differently. There is a choice of king or queen beds, topped with feather duvets and pillows; some rooms have whirlpool tubs and electric fireplaces.

Without Shakespeare: I strolled Ontario St. and dropped in on a variety of shops: Fanfare Books, one of five indie bookstores in town; MacLeods Scottish Shop; Diamond Dogs Vinyl, for new and

vintage records; the must-see Small-Mart, for adorable gifts; and the 120-year-old Bradshaws, for sophisticated kitchen and house wares.

Stratford was founded in 1832, and its architecture is worth a walkabout: St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church has been refurbished; the Perth County Court House is a fine Queen Anne Revival with exceptional terra cotta work; and the Avon River is lined with beautiful houses.

If you do want to take in the most famous theatre season in Canada, the Stratford Festival runs from May to October 2017. You'll need to book early. More than 475,000 people attended in 2015. Stratford is home to 1,100 guest rooms of all types.

Foodie town: Mercer is not the only foodie highlight in town. It is one stop along Stratford's Bacon & Ale Trail that includes treats from charcuterie to butter tarts. Another adventure is the Savour Stratford Chocolate Trail, which includes 25 food purveyors. You can buy tickets for tastings on both of these self-guided tours at visitstratford.ca.

The 30-year-old Stratford Chefs School is developing a lot of this talent. Graduates of the school are working at many of Stratford's top culinary hot beds, including Rene's Bistro, The Prune and Keystone Alley, as well as Mercer.

If you would like to see the future of cooking, you can dine on meals prepared by students at the Stratford Chefs School Kitchens (519-271-1414, stratford-chef.com).

Rochelle@rochellelash.com
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