

# LIFE+STYLE

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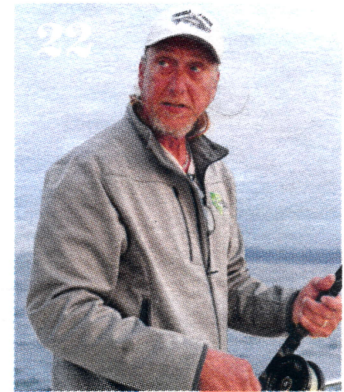
SUMMER 2018

## INSIDE

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WS INSIDER [ *at home with ...* ]



# Shirley Lang

Culinary explorer and  
chef extraordinaire

by HANS TAMMEMAGI  
photos DON DENTON





Venison appetizer.

**A**N EXQUISITE WHITE PLATE, HOLDING A DEVILLED EGG OF CHIPOTLE-INFUSED CRAB DECORATED WITH TWO SMALL WILD FLOWERS, IS PLACED BEFORE ME. Beside it, a white spoon contains delicate black caviar, sitting on a sprout of cedar. A candelabra glows on the table. I can't possibly disturb such an artistic presentation! My resistance breaks, however, and I take a little bite. It is heavenly.

Sipping a sparkling La'p Cheet rosé from Kelowna's Indigenous World Winery, I brace myself, for this is just the first of a six-course feast with paired wines.

Slowly and with great pleasure I spend the next hours savouring Chef Shirley Lang's Table Luncheon. Venison pâté with juniper berry and port mousse in a cremini mushroom is next. Then comes smoked sablefish with miso and wild-wood sorrel oil on Moroccan-scented kabocha squash



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Chef Shirley Lang serves prawns and red and yellow cherry tomatoes marinated in Wild Wood Sorrel Oil on arugula; and micro green salad with a hint of Wild Oregon Grape Vinaigrette with wild flowers and a venison appetizer.

with portobello mushroom and wild sea asparagus. The dishes are beautifully presented, a feast for the eyes as well as the palate. It is one of the best meals I've ever had.

Are my friends and I in a high-end gourmet restaurant? No, we're in Langford at the home of Chef Shirley Lang. She stands in the kitchen, her black hair contrasting an elegant, red chef's jacket, with the next course arrayed before her.

Dining at Chef Shirley's home, I realize, is far more comfortable than at a high-end restaurant. The atmosphere is relaxed and there are no extraneous noises, no crowding or desperately flagging the wait staff. Everything moves smoothly.

Often the greatest treasures are hidden right before you, if you only look. Chef Shirley and her companies, Kitchens of Distinction and Spirit Culinary Excursions, are such gems.

A Cree woman, her early life was spent in the prairies before she moved to Toronto and established several hair salons and a talent agency. She was successful, working with music stars such as the Nylons, Colin James, Doug & the Slugs and many, many more.

“ The kitchen is the peaceful and meditative place that allows me to share my creativity, my gifts and my passion for global cuisine and everything associated with it. ”



In 1996, she moved to British Columbia, first to Vancouver and then to Victoria, where she started to put down her culinary roots and show her gastronomic talent. She also maintained her Indigenous heritage by working in the Native justice system.

But cooking was in her blood.

"No matter what path I took, the kitchen was the space that fed my soul, that calmed my world," she says. "The kitchen is the peaceful and meditative place that allows me to share my creativity, my gifts and my passion for global cuisine and everything associated with it."

Chef Shirley was raised with an inherent respect for Indigenous ways and the power of the earth's abundance. She has a passion for fresh, local food, especially if it is foraged, and she loves spices because she feels they touch the soul. She prepares dishes which are rooted not only in Aboriginal traditions but also in the styles of Morocco, Spain, Turkey, Lebanon and India.

In explaining her cooking philosophy, she says, "I like to go rustic but elegant, blending old with new. I'm not pretentious. You won't find art nouveau on my plates."

Through Kitchens of Distinction, Chef Shirley prepares gourmet meals that can be enjoyed at her home, the client's home or at other venues. She also caters for functions. Best of all, her company, Spirit Culinary Excursions, organizes tantalizing tours that are tailor-made to suit a client's tastes. The title Culinary Explorer suits her well.

My friends and I are on an Indigenous-themed tour. Our first stop on a deserted rocky beach west of Sooke reveals Chef Shirley's predilection for developing close working relationships. Amanda Swinimer of Dakini Tidal Wilds, wears a wetsuit as

she wades in to hip depth, hand-harvesting a surprisingly large variety of edible seaweeds. She explains that seaweeds are plentiful and also among the most nutritive and complete foods.

"They are nature's perfectly balanced mineral supplement," she explains.

In the afternoon, Tabitha Jones of the Vancouver Island Wild Tea Company tours us through a forest in Royal Roads in search of berries and edible plants. I'm astonished at the abundance of wild, free food! Finishing, we come upon a table replete with white tablecloth and candelabra at the forest's edge, where we enjoy smoked sturgeon and wild goose tongue grass sandwiches, cucumber and wild-wood sorrel crème cheese sandwiches, nettle cookies and wild tea from stinging nettle, Douglas fir and vanilla leaf.

Chef Shirley explains, "All the flowers and greens in my luncheon feast were picked by Tabitha in this forest."

The evening offers another delight as we feast on wild sockeye salmon cooked over an open fire in the traditional Native fashion. Elder Earl Claxton of the Tsawout First Nation shows Native handicrafts, including a cedar hat, deer-hoof rattle and canoe bailer.

Later, Chef Shirley describes one of her more popular events, the Clandestine Dinner.

"Everything is top secret," she explains. "The location, the chef, the menu, the theme, the entertainment and the guest list. You sign up, but never know what or who you may encounter. At one Clandestine Dinner, for example, a tent was set up in my backyard with Moroccan pillows and décor. I served a Moroccan dinner for 16 people. It was great fun."

I can't wait to have a similar surprise. **WS**

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