

Caliber of food as varied as the choices in Vail

Publisher's note: *This is the third of four days of stories about issues pertaining to Vail.*

By Kathryn Reed

VAIL – It would be hard to go hungry in this ski town and easy to not have enough cash for a lift ticket the next day.

Although the area has plenty of high-end restaurants, they aren't all that way. A good mix of places to eat and drink exists. On a trip to the area earlier this month I tried to sample a variety of places.

What surprised me is by the end of the week I had more pleasurable experiences on the mountain during the day. But I was alone in this assessment. Perhaps it's the hazards of being a vegetarian.



A snowcat is needed to get to the Game Creek restaurant at Vail.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

A nice touch at the Vail Chophouse in Lionshead is at 3:30 each afternoon patrons are poured a glass of Champagne – for free.

Sue asked our waiter J.D. about free refills. He smiled and without missing a bit said, “Ya, right. You are in Vail, remember?”

Prices at this slopeside restaurant are reasonable. Sue and my aunt Linda couldn't finish the six sliders and fries (\$9). We each had a hot drink, with my Café Grand (Grand Marnier, Godiva chocolate liquor, coffee, whip cream and nutmeg) being the most expensive at \$8.50.

But this is the type of place my 26-year-old cousin who teaches children's ski school part time would not venture into. So, off to Bart & Yeti's we went to meet her and my uncle Tom.

We recommend a pint (\$4.75) of the Hazed and Infused from the Boulder Beer Company. The fries are better here, too.

One night the five of us ate at Bully Ranch, which classifies itself as “casual, Western style atmosphere and Southwestern and American menu.” Not sure how they qualify as Southwestern. It definitely is not the place to take a vegetarian, especially when she is buying.

Nonetheless, I was able to get through the evening with soup and salad. The tomato cheddar soup (\$6) is quite good. The beer battered fish and chips (\$17) were well received by my dining companions.

A fun place for a beer after a day of skiing is Moe's Original Barbecue in Lionshead. Definitely a young crowd. The jalapeno corn bread is yummy.

The five of us went to Game Creek one night. By day this is a members' only retreat, while at night it is open to the

public. We took the gondola up out of Lionshead. From there a tricked out snowcat took us on a 6-minute ride to the restaurant.

Executive Chef David Clawson said cooking at 10,300 feet is only an issue for baking and pastries.

“One of our goals is to exceed people’s expectations being in that remote location,” Clawson said.

Clawson is going on his third year at Game Creek, having worked at Le Meridien in San Francisco and the Lodge at Vail prior to this job.

The meals are \$82 for three courses, \$92 for four courses and \$102 for five courses.

Tucked back in a corner table presented challenges for the waiters trying to fill water glasses, and serve and retrieve dishes. The room is large and open, without any intimacy. It’s vast and unappealing like a casino banquet room, with little ambiance.

At the end of the evening we had mixed reviews. Yes, it’s fun. Would we do it again? Not me. But Tom’s assessment was, “The experience was totally worth it.” Sue would go back for the food. She liked the crab and corn soup, while Christina thought it a bit watery. Tom said the duck confit was incredible. Three of us had the asparagus starter that was good, but didn’t wow us. Sue raved about the scallops. My tofu-mushroom dish needed flavor and was cold.

If you go, get the duck confit, scallops and sticky toffee pear for dessert.

A couple nights later it was the cousins on the top of Beaver Creek for a unique dining experience at Beano’s Cabin. This time we were hauled up at dusk in a sleigh pulled by a snowcat.

Sam the banjo picker from Tennessee distracted us from the chill in the air as we huddled under heavy blankets.

I had been told Executive Chef Steve Topple was looking forward to creating something special for me – the vegetarian in the group. After the waiter went over the specials I asked what he would recommend for a vegetarian. He said I'd probably have to order off the menu, but would check with the chef. The menu was all I could choose from. So much for creativity.

At \$85 for a three-course meal or \$105 for five-course, I'd recommend vegetarians not dine here. My first course options were pizza (which I had at lunch), chili or salad. The salad was good. My option for the entrée was beet gnocchi. Fine.

But then I tasted it and winced because of the saltiness. Sue took a bite and said, "Oh, my god, that's a sodium rush."

She and Christina couldn't say enough good things about their first two courses. Christina said the striped bass was seasoned and cooked perfectly, while Sue said the same about her Rocky Mountain trout.

We all enjoyed our desserts – chocolate trio, banana split crème brulee, and Colorado goat cheese crepe.

We also all liked the overall feel of Beano's compared to Game Creek. The open kitchen to watch the food being prepared, the roaring fire, wood beams – it just felt like a mountain cabin.

Go there without a vegetarian in the group.

The recipe below is from David Clawson at Game Creek, though none of us had it the night we were there – it wasn't an option.

Butternut Squash & Apple Soup

$\frac{1}{2}$ lb Butter

1 Onion

6 stalk Celery

6 T Ginger fresh

12 Apples (peeled seeded and cored)

6 Butternut Squash (peeled, seeded, large dice and roasted)

3 Bay leaf

$\frac{1}{2}$ lb Flour

3 gallons Chicken stock

1 qt Applesauce

To taste Salt & White Pepper

Method:

1. Melt butter and sauté the onion, celery, and ginger
2. Add flour to make a blond roux
3. Add chicken stock, bay leaf, squash and eight apples
4. Taste for salt and white pepper
5. Simmer until vegetables are overcooked and very soft
6. Puree and pass through fine strainer (chinois)
7. Very small dice (brunoise) the other four apples add to finished soup.

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