

Beaver Creek scores with days of culinary riches

By Kathryn Reed

BEAVER CREEK – Unfamiliar aromas waft through the room, dozens of corks are coming out of wine bottles, chefs usually only seen in magazines or on television are milling about. This weekend is all about eating and drinking, and a little about getting on the mountain.

It's definitely not your ordinary ski vacation. Talk among guests proved that. People were not chatting about which runs they went on or how the snow conditions are or even past ski experiences – it was all about what was on the other end of the fork or spoon or what was being swirled in a particular glass.

Instead of flying all over the country to taste the delectable dishes of seven well-known chefs, Beaver Creek assembled the culinary geniuses in one place. John Besh, Anthony Giglio, Tim Love, Spike Mendelsohn, Alex Seidel, Gail Simmons and Sam Talbot were the stars.

The Jan. 24-27 annual Beaver Creek Food & Wine Weekend is an experience for those who enjoy food that is off the charts good, wines not found in all restaurants or store shelves, and a camaraderie among foodies that has conversations turning to: "What was in that pumpkin puff?" "How did they get the beets sliced like that?" "Was the pasta sautéed in rabbit au jus?"



No shortage of wine at the Beaver Creek Food + Wine Festival. Photos/Kathryn Reed

It would have been impossible to attend all of the events during the four-day affair, but it's easy to pick one event or put a package together. A couple from Denver opted for the Snowshoe & Gourmet lunch – it was her birthday present from her husband. (This event often sells out.) Last year people met at the event and said they wanted to come back – so that's what the new group of friends did. A couple from Key West picked a package stacked with events – so much so they had to skip one they were so full. One couple mentioned how they have been to 70 countries and each trip revolves around food. A couple from the Houston area wanted an adult vacation.

While Beaver Creek is known for being a family-friendly resort, the food and wine event definitely caters to a different crowd – one that doesn't even have to touch the snow.

The first night was an opportunity for the chefs of Beaver Creek (Christian Apetz, David Gutowski, Daniel Joly, Jay McCarthy, David Walford and Kirk Weems) to wow the group.

Walford took an animal familiar to those in Colorado – lamb – and turned it into a stew that some called “magnificent.”

When it came to the foie gras stuffed Twinkies the reactions were mixed – from “oh, ya” they are worth having to “Twinkies

should only be filled with something sweet”.

The celebrity chefs had the night off from work in the kitchen, but they worked the crowd so guests could ask for a tip or two.

Events like this are also an opportunity for wineries to get in front of people who might not be familiar with their label. Paula Schweiger of Schweiger Vineyards and Winery in St. Helena says only family members or employees pour so customers can get information “right from the source”. This was not true of all the wineries at this event.

For Ed St. John at Pedroncelli in Geyserville the thinking is an event like this attracts people from all over the country, so he is reaching a broader demographic than if it were a locals-only event.

Matt Jones, who is on the national board of directors for Slow Food USA, looks over the assembled celebrity chefs and says, “There are killer purveyors here tonight. Alex Seidel is a terrific chef and former *Food + Wine* top new chef.”

(*Food + Wine* magazine is the other main player besides Beaver Creek in putting on the event.)

Seidel owns Fruition restaurant in Denver. Vail visitors may remember him when he was the chef de cuisine at Sweet Basil. He’s all about cooking with local ingredients. So much so that he has a 10-acre farm that in addition to fruit and vegetables being grown, sheep are raised for their milk that is turned into cheese.

Gourmet lunches

Seidel was the featured chef with Grouse Mountain Grill Executive Chef Gutowski at the Snowshoe & Gourmet Lunch. The day started with a trek through Beaver Creek’s McCoy Park Nordic Center. It ended at Gutowski’s restaurant inside the

Pines Lodge.

To take the chill off from the lift ride down, hot cocoa is served – made with Lindt chocolate. It was like having dessert before the main course.

Then the glasses of Schweiger 2011 Sauvignon Blanc came around. (Stella, Leffe and Hoegaarden beers were available at most of the events as well.)

“I wanted to do as much as I could from Colorado,” Seidel told the diners as they started in on the roasted beet salad.

The pumpkins used for the puffs that were served with the first wine came from a farmer in Boulder. The rogue blue panna cotta for the salad is from Seidel’s sheep.

The salad, which also came with poached pear and almond vinaigrette, and pickled pearl onions was so pretty it was hard to ruin it with a fork. But it was too inviting not to want to devour.

“It’s like a rock concert for your mouth,” Jude Mansur of Fair Hope, Ala., said of the salad.

This was paired with a 2009 Schweiger Merlot.

Winemaker Andy Schweiger said they bottle the Merlot after 36 months “to give the tannins more time to obliterate.” This is twice the amount of time some wineries wait to bottle.

“I make wines to complement food,” he told the group.

Only 300 cases of the Merlot were bottled; with a good number of those opened in Beaver Creek last weekend.

The 2008 Schweiger Cabernet Sauvignon was chosen to go with the braised rabbit pappardelle. The rabbit had caramelized cauliflower, clamshell mushroom conserva, with truffled rabbit jus.

Superlatives ran off the tongues of those at the table as they barely paused between bites.

The house-made crème fraiche cake with vanilla cream, lemon curd and huckleberry sorbet was paired with the Schweiger Port X.

The port is 100 percent Cab grapes that are blended with brandy.

The dessert was so incredible that the table wanted seconds.

The next day diners got a little exercise via the slopes of Beaver Creek before the exquisite lunch that was prepared at the Ritz-Carlton, Bachelor Gulch. Chef John Besh, who was also on the slopes, admitted the first course was prepared by his team.

His Southern roots did not necessarily inspire Besh's dishes for the day. He served elk as the main course. This is a common item on menus in Colorado.

He told *Lake Tahoe News* he prepares the foods he grew up with – like gumbo, etouffee and jambalaya – when he is at home.

Besh owns six restaurants in the New Orleans area. He's participated in nine Iron Chef competitions and was runner-up on Food Networks' "Next Iron Chef".

Besh said he tries to ski two weeks a year, with the food and wine event his adult week.

Walking into the dining area guests are handed a glass of Capture 2010 Chardonnay. Slippers are also provided so ski boots don't have to be worn during lunch.

The first course is cauliflower and lobster bisque with quail and brioche toad-in-the-hole and shaved white truffle. This is paired with Hoegaarden beer. The thick broth is poured tableside onto the ingredients already in the bowl. Chunks of

lobster are in the soup so there is no mistaking what is being served.

The main course was chestnut cavatelli, a ragout of elk shoulder and wild mushrooms. It was paired with a Capture 2009 Cabernet.

“It’s like filet mignon,” Gary Mathews of Key West raved.

Dessert was a warm gateau Basque with red wine preserved berries. It was served with a Capture 2008 Port.

(The Healdsburg winery poured a Sauvignon Blanc at the Grand Tasting that they said is the No. 1 Sauvignon Blanc at the French Laundry in Yountville.)

Grand Tasting

For the signature event, the Grand Tasting is about nibbling on culinary treats from the celebrity chefs as well as Beaver Creek’s chefs, all the while pairing the food with mostly California wines, but a few Colorado ones as well. (Two Rivers in Grand Junction, Colo., was a nice find.)

Jay McCarthy, corporate chef for Group970 Restaurants, is taking a breather from his station. He’s letting Chris Foley of Beaver Creek Chophouse handle the jalapeno and cheddar elk mac and cheese. McCarthy has been up since 7am getting ready for the tasting that started at 7pm at the Park Hyatt.

McCarthy says it’s a tight brotherhood of chefs in Beaver Creek. After all, the enclave only has 400 residents, while the county has 30,000. With a million skiers hitting the slopes, the multitude of restaurants has a lot of hungry people to feed.

Many of those restaurants came out to show off what they can do. Dishes ranged from smoked trout parfait to slow roasted guinea hen breast to toast with ricotta.

But that wasn't any ordinary toast with ricotta. Chef Sam Talbot used Korean style figs and braised scallions. It was just the right balance between the sweetness of the figs with the cheese.

Bryan Simonsen at Blue Moose Pizza created what he called autumn pizza. It was crimini mushrooms, truffle oil, parsley, Parmesan, garlic, olive oil and goat cheese on a whole wheat crust.

The mini ding dongs from Christina Apetz and Janielle Hultberg at 8100 Mountainside Bar & Grill brought back fond childhood memories for many people. Their more adult dessert was beer floats. Chocolate ice cream for a dark beer like Leffe, lemon for the Stella.

Other events

There were three other events on the Friday for a total of five. The Burgers & Beers will be featured in an upcoming *Lake Tahoe News* story.

And there were four events people could partake in on Saturday.

Sunday was the Celebrity Chef Ski Race & Brunch.

While the 2014 dates and events have not been announced, the Beaver Creek website will have details when available.

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