

# S. Tahoe restaurant owner strives for originality



Gunbarrel restaurant's Lamb Lollipops, from left, Tower 16 Tuna and Brie sandwich. Photo/LTN

**By Kathryn Reed**

Unconventional. That's exactly what the owner of Gunbarrel Tavern & Eatery wants to be.

"We are here to give the finger to standard ideas about what a menu is supposed to be. We try to do things different ... to not abide by anything you have to do," Alex Cox said.

Cox this month opened Gunbarrel restaurant in Heavenly Village where Wolfgang Puck's used to be. He is also the owner of 22 Bistro at the Village at Squaw Valley.

He has incorporated his love for skiing into the names of his

restaurants. Gunbarrel is the same name as Heavenly Mountain Resort's face and the 22 comes from Squaw's renowned KT-22.

Cox thought he was moving to Lake Tahoe to be a ski bum after he graduated from the University of Indiana. He was right. But what wasn't in the original plan was to make Tahoe his home. That he has done for more than a decade.

What he brings to the restaurant business is a desire to showcase foods he and his staff like, with dishes that are unique, some that are prepared in original ways and other items that appeal to the masses.

Billy McCullough is the executive chef at both restaurants. McCullough is also executive chef of Dragonfly, the Truckee restaurant he owns. He is also the co-founder of Slow Food Lake Tahoe.

Gunbarrel's head chef is Ricky Sausser. Sausser grew up on the North Shore. He worked for McCullough before being hired at 22 Bistro in 2009.

The goal, according to Cox, will be to use as much local food as possible. Local, though, could be the Central Valley since not much grows in Tahoe. But what he would like to do is use the biodome in Truckee or the one proposed for Squaw Valley to grow something like chard or kale to have on the menu as a truly locally sourced item.

Talks are also under way with farmers in Nevada to potentially provide produce to Gunbarrel.

The range of menu choices is varied. Those in the media who were invited to a special tasting last week raved about the Mac N' Cheese. It comes as an appetizer with bacon, but as a side (without bacon) with the PBR Beer Can Chicken. This chicken is Cox's favorite on the menu. An *LTN* reporter said she would easily order the chicken again.

For the Lamb Lollipops it takes some time over the grill before they come to the table. This is because the lack of a binding agent requires the chef to apply pressure as they cook so the meat stays on the stick. Then this appetizer is served with a harissa yogurt sauce and a mini cucumber mint salad.

The Tower 16 Tuna was another app that people raved about. The Fire-Roasted Cauliflower with achiote chili oil and toasted lemon zest just gets better as the flavors meld together.

The caramelized onions and balsamic glaze on the Brie Grilled Cheese added sweetness to the sandwich and balanced the richness of the Brie. The chips served with it are cooked and seasoned at the restaurant. What's in the seasoning is a secret. But each bite is a bit different, at times sweet, at times spicy – all good.

To complement the variety of food items is an interesting drink menu. The beer and wine choices are limited.

Even the décor is a bit eclectic. The exposed concrete is a bit new age-industrial, while the tables are mountain wood.

Cox is working on creating an outside bar and eating area that would include fire pits and live music.

“At this time, due to the prohibitive cost, Gunbarrel Tavern does not validate parking. We are currently looking into other potential solutions but have yet to come to an effective resolution. We are hopeful, however, that we will be able to validate customer parking in the future,” Cox told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Gunbarrel is open for lunch and dinner seven days a week.