

Northstar redefines ski lodge dining



It takes a culinary team to serve up to 80 people at once at the Mountain Table Dinners at the top of Northstar. Photo Copyright 2015 Carolyn E. Wright

By Kathryn Reed

TRUCKEE – Long wooden tables elegantly adorned with place settings, each with four wine glasses, three forks and three knives. This was no ordinary dinner at a ski lodge.

Foie gras is coming out of the kitchen, bubbly is being poured. Helena Kletch and JT Chevalier are providing background music. There is no fried food, no hot cocoa, no loud screaming children. Nor are there ski boots or ski attire of any kind.

Zephyr Lodge at the top of Northstar turns into a fine-dining restaurant twice a month in what is being billed as Mountain

Table Dinners. The five-course meals are created to complement that evening's winemaker. On this particular night Frank Family Vineyards of Calistoga is featured.



Plenty of reasons to toast – to good food, good wine, good friends. Photo Copyright 2015 Carolyn E. Wright

Groups of friends fill up the two long tables. Some are from Tahoe, others from Sacramento, the Bay Area and farther away. It's a festive atmosphere, especially as more wine is consumed. As the musicians played John Denver's "Country Roads" nearly everyone started to sing the words, though not necessarily in perfect harmony.

Executive Chef Steve Anderson is a proponent of using locally sourced food as much as possible. For the plout demi that went with the bison tenderloin he thawed a stone fruit puree that he had frozen in the summer.

Tahoe Food Hub, the nonprofit beneficiary of the night, is a main source for his fresh vegetables.



The Zephyr Lodge becomes a fine dining restaurant. Photo Copyright 2015 Carolyn E. Wright

Anderson and Chef Chad Shrewsbury are discussing how best to plate one of the dishes as servers are at the ready.

“We have completely different styles, but the same palates,” Anderson tells *Lake Tahoe News* of the three chefs responsible for the meal. Dan Carter is the third. “We argue back and forth.”

It’s hard to know who won, but every dish coming out of the kitchen is exquisite.

But the meal was a bit of a dichotomy by wanting to use locally sourced products while serving controversial items like foie gras – duck liver was just allowed to return to California menus; Chilean sea bass – which has environmental concerns; veal cheek – an unusual cut of an animal more people are eating less of; and bison – which is more common in the Midwest, than California.



The winery says the Chardonnay has a creme brulee finish. Photo Copyright 2015 Carolyn E. Wright

Despite what seemed to be a conflict between philosophy and what was practiced last month, dinner guests (80 is the maximum) left little if anything on their plates. And the portions were more than ample.

The sea bass was Ann Kramer's favorite morsel of the night, but the Sacramento woman was also pleasantly surprised by the veal cheek – something she had not had before.

Bob Keller of Zephyr Cove was also impressed with the sea bass and veal. "It's fabulous. It's hard to cook fish. This is cooked perfectly," Keller said.

And the veal – "It's the best I've ever had," Keller said. "It's a fabulous dish with a lot of different flavors."

The veal cheek was served with sweet potato gnocchi, Humboldt Fog brulee and a bing cherry glaze. It was paired with a 2013 Pinot Noir, which was one of the favorite wines of the evening. It's one of those wines that can stand on its own

without food, but when paired with food has a more complex flavor and enhances the dish.

Carolyn Wright had the highest praise for the bison.

“I love game of any type. It was tough to cut, but not tough to chew. The flavors are great,” the Zephyr Cove woman said.

The 2012 Cabernet Sauvignon was paired with the bison, which Wright thought was very good, and someone else found to be young.

Everyone was complimentary of the food arriving at the tables at the same time, all hot and all plated as though it came out of a high-end kitchen. But there were no refills on any of the wines.



It takes two gondola rides to get to the restaurant.
Photo Copyright 2015 Carolyn E. Wright

The most disconcerting part of the evening was getting to and from the venue. It required taking the gondola from the village to mid-mountain, then walking to the Zephyr lift. That

lift has a few gondola cars interspersed with the regular chairs. This meant waiting in the cold for enclosed seating – which people were warned might happen. And while skiing from the top of the lift to Zephyr Lodge is no big deal, that distance suddenly seems like a ways when walking on slick, icy snow, with the wind blowing and the temperature at or below freezing. The snowmaking gun blowing on us on the way back was not pleasant.

It would seem like Northstar being a Vail Resorts property could look east for better ways to transport dining guests. At Vail, to get to Game Creek for dinner one takes the gondola out of Lionshead and from there a tricked out snowcat takes people on a 6-minute ride to the restaurant. And at Beaver Creek's Beano's Cabin, diners are hauled up at dusk in a sleigh pulled by a snowcat. But this is Northstar's inaugural season to have these dinners and the other locales are seasoned venues.

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Notes:

- The remaining dinners are Feb. 27 featuring Ferrari-Carano Vineyards & Winery (\$120), March 13 is 50/50 Brewing Co. (\$85) and March 27 is with Frog's Leap Winery (\$120).
- Must be 21 to attend.
- Vegetarian options available.
- For more info, go online.

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