

Sierra: Come for the skiing, stay for the food



Eric Sorensen is a master at the “pour over” coffee venue at Sierra. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Susan Wood

TWIN BRIDGES – Sierra-at-Tahoe has lunged to the top of its game as being a foodie destination this winter.

Four years on the job as food and beverage director, Scott Justice has upped his game at the ski resort’s restaurants, small eateries and satellite food stations.

He’s essentially traded the team sports arenas for playing in a team environment at the slopes for a different sport. Justice came from Center Plate, a concessionaire company that furnishes ballparks with stadium and arena food, having

traveled from the Cajun country of New Orleans to the East Coast culinary flair of Washington, D.C.



Solstice is focusing on Asian flavors like noodle bowls with ahi. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Justice has revamped or tweaked the menus at Sierra Pub, Mama's Kitchen, Solstice, Aspen Grill, 360 Smokehouse BBQ, 360 Grab n' Go, Golden Bear Terrace Grill, Baja Grill, Nacho Mama's, Treehouse Donuts and Java Junction.

He follows trends, keeps an eye on what works and comes up with the food offerings. He has also hired the right people to prepare, cook and serve the items. Sierra-at-Tahoe has long been revered for its community-minded, "get real" philosophy. Now the real deal is its culinary acumen.



Sierra General Manager John Rice and Pub manager Belen Urrutia talk about elevating the food scene. Photo/Kathryn Reed

“You’ll be excited about what we have,” Pub restaurant manager Belen Urrutia said, whipping out a menu she’s proud to have helped contribute to. That’s the forget-the-hierarchy thing with Sierra. Everyone has a role, and good ideas can come from anywhere. Urrutia’s are far reaching geographically, as she hails from Argentina.

Urrutia is especially enthusiastic about the chimichurri steak sandwich on the Pub menu. This diner can see why. A staple in Argentina, the sauce resembles an explosion of flavor. Surprisingly, it’s simple – parsley, olive oil, cilantro, pepper and salt in the unbelievably tasty concoction. Next to the red meat and provolone cheese and red peppers, it’s a complete meal except one needs to make room for the variety of fries, soup or kettle chips it comes with. (Note: you won’t need to eat for the rest of the day and night.)



The chimichurri steak sandwich is inspired by the Pub manager's native Argentina. Photo/Kathryn Reed

What makes working with ski food challenging is catering to that balance between providing the common staples expected at the slopes by thousands of guests while dipping into creative territory. It's also not easy to be efficient and fresh when serving food in bulk.

"We're trying to find that sweet spot in volume," Justice said.

He compliments food supplier Sysco for going out of its way to accommodate the resort, including providing ingredients from the region so it's as local as possible when appropriate.



Susan Wood cuts into chicken and waffles, a first for her. Photo/Kathryn Reed

With all the rage being sustainable, local food, Justice started receiving his barbecue meat for the 360 Smokehouse at the Grandview Lodge from Sonny's BBQ in South Lake Tahoe, where the pork simmers for 14 hours.

As far as the ski area's target audience, the San Francisco Bay Area still rules as the lake region's feeder market. From the Bay comes a large Asian demographic seeking a bit of its home cuisine.

That's why Justice took aim at its latest restaurant on the plaza. Solstice has become enlightened in a big way to serve up dishes that may rival any Asian eatery on the South Shore.

It's one thing to have a Thai chicken lettuce wrap, it's quite

another to serve up ahi chunks atop of a noodle bowl complemented nicely with green onions and carrots. It's best served alongside a Banh Mi sandwich served with gulf coast shrimp, teriyaki beef or tofu (intended as a nod to vegetarians) – an exquisite combination national park-traveling cook Nathan Vandenberg said he whipped up in about five minutes. Aiming to further impress, the Solstice staff hopes to add a miso salmon sandwich.



Scott Justice, who is in charge of all food and beverage operations at Sierra, is able to be more creative at a resort that isn't overly corporate. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Overall, Justice has found the appeal widespread.

"Americans as a whole are getting more adventurous," he told *Lake Tahoe News* on tour of the resort's restaurants.

And the ski area known for its seasoned athletes has expanded

its repertoire of seasonings in the kitchen.

“I believe part of the difference (with ski resort food) runs parallel to food service at stadiums,” said Justice, who grew up skiing at the Pocono Mountains in Pennsylvania.

It used to be stadium food’s reputation rested with hot dogs, chicken tenders, pizza, burgers and fries – which all have a place with “a captive audience” associated with sporting events.



Shrimp and grits represents the Southern flare at Sierra. Photo/Kathryn Reed

“Today, it’s sushi,” he said. “Anything you want is there. We’re fortunate enough to see that progression.”

Justice would even like to expand into North African flavors in his offerings and beef up the Indian cuisine in the near future.

“Those spices are so different,” he said.

Beyond the flavor, much can be said for style at the Baja Grill. Also in respect to the Bay Area, Justice’s team will summon the Mission-style burrito named after the renowned Mexican food district in The City.

The snow beach outpost at the West Bowl section is extremely popular with the afternoon crowd. Also from the west side, street tacos will round out the menu there by transporting a hungry patron to Mexico. For veggie lovers, Sierra has added a chili relleno burrito there.



Old standbys like chicken tenders and burgers, albeit the latter is grass fed, are still available at Sierra. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Carnivores can order Mama’s mainstay item at the base to start the day – the breakfast “bro-rito,” which is heavy with carnitas, scrambled eggs, shredded cheese and tater tots wrapped in a tortilla. The all-in-one meal satisfies the no-plate-necessary guest – another trend Justice has noticed.

Justice’s staff has even brought a new flair to the

mysteriously popular chicken and waffles dish at Mama's. The fried chicken, albeit doused with syrup, comes with a slightly healthy hint of kale slaw.

For other breakfast offerings, the shrimp and grits will take your taste buds away as a unique, New Orleans-inspired dish that will prompt anyone to give up cereal and oatmeal.

Even the presentation matches, if not exceeds, most lake-level restaurants.

"Presentation is all a part of the food. People eat with their eyes," Justice said.

Indeed, this foodie who admits to cooking at home is a visionary and passes that on to the 120 employees he manages. The team at Mama's on the first floor of the main lodge is usually teeming and bustling with skiers and boarders trying to prepare and fill up for a hardy day on the slopes.

"Teamwork – you can accomplish so much firing on all cylinders," he said.

Most of the food venues are at the base area, giving those who are not skiing or snowboarding an opportunity to eat well, too. Dishes are reasonably priced, and portions ample.



Craft beer is what most people choose to drink at Sierra. Photo/Kathryn Reed

The beverage brigade

Sierra's servings don't just translate to the food. Pairing food with a beverage is all part of the experience.

Forget your grandmother's Folgers. Skiers and boarders can jumpstart the day with a "pour over" coffee blend handcrafted by barista Eric Sorensen. Just smell the Ethiopia Harrar Golecha Natural eight feet away, and your taste buds will want to follow.

Even coffee addicts who junk up their mugs won't want to do that. Drinking it black helps to pick up the mere hints of blueberry.

At the Sierra Pub by midday, it's hard to find a barstool empty on a busy ski day – with riders lined up for rounds of craft beers.

By the end of the day, even visitors streaming into Tahoe up Highway 50 may want to stop in to get a box dinner for those seeking convenience before landing in town. Sierra understands this and aims to accommodate that at Solstice. Bottles of wine

with the Sierra label are available, too – a Zinfandel blend resort staff made with the help of Madroña Vineyards.