

by *donald downes*

PHOENIX RIDING HIGH

A critic's roundup of the hot new places.

The winter weary flock to Phoenix-Scottsdale for the sun, the golf and the dry, clean air but, until recently, not for the food. With a few notable exceptions, the restaurant scene has been as flat as the surrounding desert. Things have changed, however. This winter when crowds arrive for four high-profile sports events—the first World Championship of Golf, the PGA's 61st annual Phoenix Open, the Fiesta Bowl (which will help decide the national collegiate football title) and the Super Bowl—they will find a passel of terrific new restaurants. Here are the best of them, plus two intriguing brew pubs.

ARIZONA CAFE & GRILL

THE CHEF-PROPRIETOR: Christopher Gross (one of *FOOD & WINE*'s Best New Chefs in America in 1989) is also the chef-proprietor of the elegant and successful Christopher's and its casual cousin, Christopher's Bistro.

THE LOOK: White stucco meets the Old West with Navajo blankets and the like.

DON'T MISS: To start, yellow bell pepper soup with sour cream, the pizza of mesquite-smoked chicken or the escargots with cilantro-garlic butter. For the main course, the grilled salmon with pearl barley risotto, the prime rib or the 20-ounce grilled T-bone with chili-herb oil.

FAVORITE DESSERT: Mexican chocolate mousse cake

accompanied with rich chocolate ice cream and coffee sauce.

WINE LIST PICK: The wine list is extensive, but the food pairs particularly well with beer. Try the St. Rogue Red ale (\$6) with the smoked-chicken pizza and the Ayinger (\$4.50), a dark German lager, with the T-bone.

THE DETAILS: 3113 E. Lincoln Dr., Phoenix; 602-957-0777. Lunch entrées \$5.95 to \$8.95. Dinner entrées \$8.75 to \$19.95.

LON'S AT THE HERMOSA INN

THE CHEF: Michael DeMaria, a member of the U.S. team in the 1992 Culinary Olympics and most recently executive chef of the Wilshire Country Club in Los Angeles.

THE LOOK: Santa Fe redux, with white walls, wood beams, terra-cotta tiles on the floor, decorative ironwork and beehive fireplaces.

DON'T MISS: To start, the baked phyllo-wrapped Brie with roasted garlic-tomato salsa or the tortilla-crust salmon and crab cake on a tomato confit served with frisée. For the main course, the roasted duck breast with ginger lentils and Swiss chard Florentine or the grilled salmon fillet with a polenta cake, all sprinkled with a confetti of leeks, carrots and shiitake mushrooms and a chive beurre blanc.

FAVORITE DESSERT: White chocolate cheesecake on blueberry-port sauce, topped with a crumbled hazelnut Florentine. ▶



Evocative scenes from the Old West set the stage for Arizona Café's thoroughly modern southwestern cooking.



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BREW PUBS: MORE THAN BEER

Like the froth in a fresh tankard of ale, both handcrafted beers and brew pubs have risen in popularity. Unfortunately, the quality of the pubs' food is often left in the dust by that of the beers and ales. But that's not the case in Phoenix-Scottsdale, where these two establishments have menus that stand tall next to the brew list.

HOPS! BISTRO AND BREWERY, with its handsome industrial decor, brews 16 different beers over the course of a year and offers at least five on tap daily. Chef Nicholas Graff and brewmaster Sean McLin list an appropriate beer with each menu item: an amber ale, for example, with the shrimp fra diavolo cooked in amber ale and served on angel-hair pasta with chipotle peppers (Scottsdale Fashion Square, 7000 E. Camelback Rd., Scottsdale;



602-945-4677. Other locations at Biltmore Fashion Park, 2584 E. Camelback Rd., Phoenix; 602-468-0500 and at 8668 E. Shea Blvd., Scottsdale; 602-998-7777. Lunch entrées \$5.95 to \$7.95. Dinner entrées \$6.95 to \$14.95).

COYOTE SPRINGS BREWING COMPANY brews six beers every day in a glass-enclosed room behind the pub's 112-year-old antique bar. New executive chef Willis Getchell's menu complements brewmaster Brian Miller's beers. One tasty pairing: English brown ale and a sandwich featuring beer-marinated beef with jalapeño Jack cheese and three-pepper ketchup. Sample a wedge of stout cheesecake for dessert. A downtown branch just opened recently (Town & Country

Shopping Center, 4883 N. 20th St., Phoenix; 602-468-0403. The new location is at 122 E. Washington St., Phoenix; 602-256-6645. Lunch entrées \$4.95 to \$6.50. Dinner entrées \$4.95 to \$10.95).

WINE LIST PICK: The 1992 Penfolds Shiraz/Cabernet Koonunga Hill (\$24).

THE DETAILS: 5532 N. Palo Cristi Rd., Paradise Valley; 602-955-7878. Lunch entrées \$7.50 to \$12.50. Dinner entrées \$11.95 to \$22.95.

TARBELL'S

THE PROPRIETOR AND CHEF: Owner Mark Tarbell most recently supervised the restaurants at The Boulders Resort in nearby Carefree. Chef Mark Bloom followed Tarbell from The Boulders.

THE LOOK: A simple yet sophisticated neighborhood café with clean lines and copper accents.

DON'T MISS: To start, the cold smoked rock shrimp with plum tomato relish and focaccia or the oak-fired soft-shell crabs with jicama slaw. For the main course, barbecued glazed salmon served with greens and set on a crisp potato cake or the pepper steak with potatoes au gratin and

creamed spinach. A side of cream biscuits is a must. **FAVORITE DESSERT:** Cheesecake with sour cream and mascarpone.

WINE LIST PICK: The 1993 Etude Pinot Noir (\$44).

THE DETAILS: 3213 E. Camelback Rd., Phoenix; 602-955-8100. Only dinner served. Entrées \$13.95 to \$24.50.

WINDOWS ON THE GREEN

THE CHEF: Robert McGrath (one of *FOOD & WINE's* Best New Chefs in America in 1988) was formerly the executive chef at Houston's Four Seasons Hotel.

THE LOOK: Golf-getaway chic with sweeping views of The Phoenician's manicured championship golf course. **DON'T MISS:** To start, panfried mozzarella from Dallas on a black bean cake served with a tomatillo salsa and a roasted tomato-chipotle sauce or the rock shrimp tamale with a green corn sauce and a mango-jalapeño salsa. For the main course, hot-smoked fillet of salmon with a chipotle vinaigrette and a salad of fingerling potatoes or the venison chop cured in sugar and chile and served with a fire-roasted red onion sauce and grits.

FAVORITE DESSERT: The hot fudge sundae with *cajeta* (caramel) ice cream and bananas.

WINE LIST PICK: The 1994 Ferrari-Carano Fumé Blanc (\$25).

THE DETAILS: The Phoenician, 6000 E. Camelback Rd., Scottsdale; 602-941-8200. Lunch entrées \$7.50 to \$15. Dinner entrées \$16 to \$25. ■

Donald Downes, the food editor of *Scottsdale Magazine*, frequently writes about Phoenix area restaurants and is the author of *The Menu, Phoenix/Scottsdale: The Best Restaurants* (David Thomas Publishing).



Bright lights, big flavors are what you'll find at Tarbell's.