

Anasazi days and nights

by John Vollertsen

I don't know about you, but I've heard enough about economic downturn, recession, depression, slump, decline, and inflation. I truly believe that living well is the best revenge—as are vacationing well and dining well. In keeping with that credo, then, a stay at the luxurious Rosewood Hotel's Inn of the Anasazi, in downtown Santa Fe, is the perfect antidote to the fiscal blues—and it doesn't require a bank loan, bailout, or financial recovery package. Just steps away from our historic Plaza, the Anasazi offers world-class service, delicious au courant cuisine, and location, location, location.

The great service starts at the front door—and the front desk. There's an extra helping of hospitality here, and the staff's interaction with guests has the vibe of professional familiarity (maybe because of Anasazi's relatively small size: only 58 rooms), much like the rapport found in any good European inn. The rooms are just as inviting; on a recent stay, our accommodations were bright and appointed with artistic touches evoking (but not going overboard with) the inn's native Anasazi motifs, which play a big part in the design here. The big, comfy, overstuffed lounge chair begged us to read and then nap next to the fire (still welcome even in late spring), but the promise of Chef Oliver Ridgeway's heralded menu quickly lured us to the dining room.

First, we met friends visiting from the East Coast for a drink in the cozy library, just off the lobby. They've stayed at the Inn for decades, bragging to us that "It's the *only* place we ever stay in Santa Fe." The fireplace there was just as toasty as the one in our upstairs room, and we noticed, too, that the library was adorned with books and board games—should you really want to hide away from it all. Our touristy delight seemed to give the helpful hotel concierge the idea that we're *all* out-of-towners; he checked to see if we needed any assistance. Poor man. We told him we'd traveled all of one mile to get there, before toasting ourselves with a round of perfectly tart and bracing margaritas.

Often hotel dining rooms languish in the hotel-food doldrums, ignored by locals and foodies due to a lack of creativity and fabulosity on the menu. Not so the Anasazi Restaurant. It is often mentioned in the same breath with Santa Fe's other top restaurants—Coyote Café, Geronimo, the Compound, and Restaurant Martín—and it is the British-born Ridgeway's talent that creates this excitement.

What used to be called "Southwest cuisine" in the late '80s and '90s has all but disappeared from our local food scene (save the authentic version that Eric DiStefano keeps reinventing over at the Coyote). But perhaps because Ridgeway is a transplant to our town (after stopovers in Europe, Australia, and the Caribbean), his discovery and exploration of our indigenous dishes and ingredients has fueled his enthusiasm, and that passion spills over into his cooking. He adds to this newfound fervor the techniques learned in his travels and discoveries. What he has created is "Santa Fe modern cookery," and I admit, I'm a big fan.

Originally, I'd planned on making this weekend at the Anasazi a



Chef Oliver Ridgeway's scrumptious bar menu samplers: a lamb-chop "lollypop," a mini crab cake, a two-bite taco, and a mini buffalo burger.

staycation with my friend—just a light dinner from the bar menu and an early movie. But after our out-of-town guests departed, my friend and I found ourselves ensconced in the dining room's pillowed banquettes, sipping on glasses of French champagne and admiring the dramatic Chaco Canyon-style stone wall and the Native hieroglyphics painted throughout the restaurant and lounge. So much for the movie.

The week before, some friends and I had ordered from the bar, and its menu was as imaginative as it was delectable. It includes gourmet versions of pizza, nachos, quesadillas, and the like, all of it given an intriguing spin that showcases Ridgeway's skill.

That night, we'd started with the tasty two-bite tacos—a trio of crispy won-ton shells, one stuffed with shrimp, one with ahi tuna, one with salmon, and all topped with a fiery mango salsa and a smooth avocado mousse. It was the perfect starter dish. After that, we dove into the clever flight of bytes, which consisted of a succulent lamb chop "lollypop," a mini crab cake, another taco, and a mini buffalo burger. Each element had a delicious,

distinctive sauce and flavor—we wished we'd had more lollipops, until the assorted meze arrived. This nifty nosh, made up of a creamy green-chile hummus (with a kick), an eggplant baba ghanoush, and an appropriately salty olive tapenade, was ideal for plunging breadsticks into and smearing onto our lavosh. Finally, since summer temperatures and the thought of putting on a swimsuit still seemed months away, the parmesan truffle fries seemed like a good idea.

But all that was merely the bar banquet. On the more recent visit, my friend and I dined on Ridgeway's even more fabulous dinner menu. I already had this transplant pegged as a respectable interpreter of our native cuisine, and the duck enchilada mole starter further reinforced my first impression. The mole put my taste buds into a tizzy and convinced me that this chef from across the pond has as adept an understanding of the subtleties of New Mexico flavors as does any chef born across the street. Ridgeway spun this classic dish mod-Mex-style, with confit of duck, Asadero cheese, green chile, and a mole sauce boasting more than 30 ingredients.

Our entrées were equally august. The seared diver scallops on a pear-and-celery mash with smoked lobster sauce was yum, yum, and yum, and the nine-spice New Mexican beef tenderloin with poblano gnocchi and coffee-piñon glaze further exhibited the fun Ridgeway is having with Norteño flavors.

The staff, and especially restaurant manager Adrian Cabral, are knowledgeable and helpful in navigating the large and worldly wine list. His recommended Bonny Doon Albariño 2009 provided a nice citrusy start to the evening. Two pinot noirs vied for first place in my favorite new pinot of 2011; the Willamette Valley Estate and the Roessler Red Peregrine were both rich and fuller flavored than I'd expected from this varietal.

For dessert, the simplicity of the citrus olive oil cake with pepper mascarpone and a wintry apple and cranberry crumble with white chocolate ice cream exemplified the ultimate in after-dinner comfort food.

Happy that we only had steps to traverse to get to our room, we canceled our movie plans. When Cabral heard us doing so, he offered that the front desk had a great



Rashers and eggs and more—British-born Anasazi chef Ridgeway's full monty breakfast

selection of DVDs we could view on our room's huge flat-screen TV. My friend and I, both fans of the Carlyle, Anasazi's sister hotel in New York City (and from whence Chef Ridgeway came), decided on *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. How perfect to drift off to sleep with the strains of "Moon River" ringing in my ears, imagining myself a young, naive George Peppard discovering the joys of the Big Apple for the first time and learning that there is "such a lot of world to see."

Breakfast the next morning paid further tribute to the talented chef's heritage as we decided to go the full monty and share a big English breakfast of grilled tomatoes, sautéed mushrooms, bacon, sausage, eggs, fried bread, and baked beans. Fresh juices, including an interesting watermelon extraction, and jumbo cups of steaming cappuccino arrived promptly—proving once more that the Inn's great service runs from sunrise to sunset.

I sincerely hope that with the spring thaw we can all let our trepidations about the financial state of the world melt away, too. Remember, prosperity starts with a thought. And here's what my visit to the Inn of the Anasazi got me to feeling, if not thinking: I'm a very rich man. And I am so ready to start singing, "Happy days are here again." Aren't you? ☞

digestifs

One sure sign that spring is in the air? Food carts. **Slurp**, just west of the capitol on Galisteo Street, ladles out soups from its beautifully refurbished 1967 Airstream trailer. And keep your palate peeled for the salad-green **Mini Vinny** van, which serves up yummy dishes from the popular and health-minded **Vinaigrette**.

Speaking of salads, you won't believe all the fabulous olive oils, vinegars, and exotic salts on offer at **Oleaceae**, on Old Santa Fe Trail near the La Fonda Hotel. The stylish showroom allows foodies to sample oils infused with Persian limes, blood oranges, and porcini mushrooms, and vinegars balmy with figs, blackberry, ginger, and juniper berry.

If Shibumi only whetted your appetite for Asian cuisine, join chefs Daniel Hoyer and Emily Swantner this fall for a very special tour of the fabulous foods and exotic culture of Vietnam. These two well-traveled gourmards consider Vietnam the epicenter of wonderful food and have both taught cooking classes locally for years: Hoyer at the Santa Fe School of Cooking and Swantner at Las Cosas. Swantner always travels with an empty extra suitcase—solely for bringing home indigenous ingredients with which to play—and Hoyer started his traveling company as an excuse to take culinary trips to Mexico while researching his three beautiful cookbooks: *Culinary Mexico*, *Mayan Cuisine*, and *Tamales*. His most recent tome, *Culinary Vietnam*, celebrates the edible wonders of the place he now calls home. Join these two foodies as they unlock the mysteries of this popular cuisine. (**Vietnam Food and Culture Adventure**, October 18–28, 2011; \$1,965 per person, based on double occupancy. Details available at epicureanodyssey.com and 505-466-1074.)

On the rumor front, word has it that Taos's Joseph Wrede, of **Joseph's Table**, will be setting up shop in Santa Fe this spring; I hope that becomes a reality. **The Pink Adobe** is back in business and doling out its famous gypsy stew and green chile stew. And I can't wait to sample more delicious goodies



(and perhaps a bigger space) at **Max's**, which is still my favorite small haunt for hot haute cuisine. American author Christopher Morley wrote, "April prepares her green traffic light and the world thinks Go." I'm ready.—JV