

Putting Brix in the Mix



Chef Laura Chamberlin Adds Her Own Flair to Flagstaff Cuisine

By Gamin Summers
Photos by Jake Bacon

Laura Chamberlin, chef at Brix Restaurant in Flagstaff, studied culinary arts at the renowned Johnson and Wales University. And she has worked at some of the finest restaurants and under the tutelage of creative, groundbreaking chefs in Colorado resort towns and in Denver and Durango. Yet one of her greatest influences is dear to her heart: her mom.

"She was always a really great cook. Growing up, it would seem like there was nothing in the house and she would make something really good. She would always make my favorite, spaghetti, for my birthday, she would always make tamales at Christmas,"



WORK OF ART The pan-seared ahi with autumn vegetable hash, creamed collards, micro-green salad and parsnip chips is just one of the many seasonal dishes that have put Brix on the fine dining map in northern Arizona.

Chamberlin said. "I still ask her questions, but now she asks me questions, too."

Chamberlin never planned to become a chef. She was studying to become a veterinarian and worked at restaurants to put herself through college, finding her way into the kitchen. She went to NAU for two years but graduated from the University of Colorado at Boulder with a degree in environmental biology. She later switched her career path toward all things culinary.

She met Paul Moir at cooking school in 2003, and when they each ended up in Flagstaff they began talking about starting a restaurant. Originally they spoke of tapas-style but eventually



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Mediterranean "Casserole"

Pre-heat oven to 400 degrees.

Use a large casserole or baking dish to assemble this dish.

The amount of vegetables used may vary based on the size of dish you use but that is one of the great aspects about cooking with ratios, it is easy to go up or down in amounts.

Ingredients:

8 large Yukon Gold Potatoes
2 Eggplants
2 Spanish onions
6-8 large vine ripened tomatoes
1-2 TBS fresh thyme-chopped fine
2 TBS garlic and 2 TBS shallots minced
Olive oil
1-2 heads of chard
High quality feta
Olive oil

Directions:

1. Thinly slice the Yukon Gold potatoes. Also, thin slice eggplant (in circles, not lengthwise) and thin slice tomatoes. Lightly coat all the vegetables with olive oil and toss with salt, pepper and thyme.
2. Oven roast the tomatoes and eggplant until eggplant is golden and the tomatoes have lost most of their moisture. (just a hint of rosemary is optional).
3. Slice the onions. Pre-heat a large, shallow pan on the stove top at medium-high heat. Add enough oil to lightly coat the bottom of the pan. Next, add the onions, stir and when they start to brown turn the heat down to low-medium. Sprinkle the onions with some salt and occasionally stir, cook until the onions are a deep golden brown. If the onions begin to cook too rapidly add about a half cup of water then stir the onions around. Allow the water to cook off, this will help keep the onions from crisping up.
4. Make sure the swiss chard is clean then slice it into ribbons and sauté with garlic and shallots, just to wilt—season with salt and pepper.
5. Next comes the assembly, start with the potatoes, layer along the bottom of the pan then drizzle with olive oil, salt and pepper.
6. Next, layer the eggplant then tomatoes, chard, onion and feta—season each layer as you go and sprinkle a little more olive oil.
7. Repeat the layer process ending tomatoes on top then feta (a little parmesan on top is a nice touch as well) then sprinkle with fresh herbs (thyme, parsley).



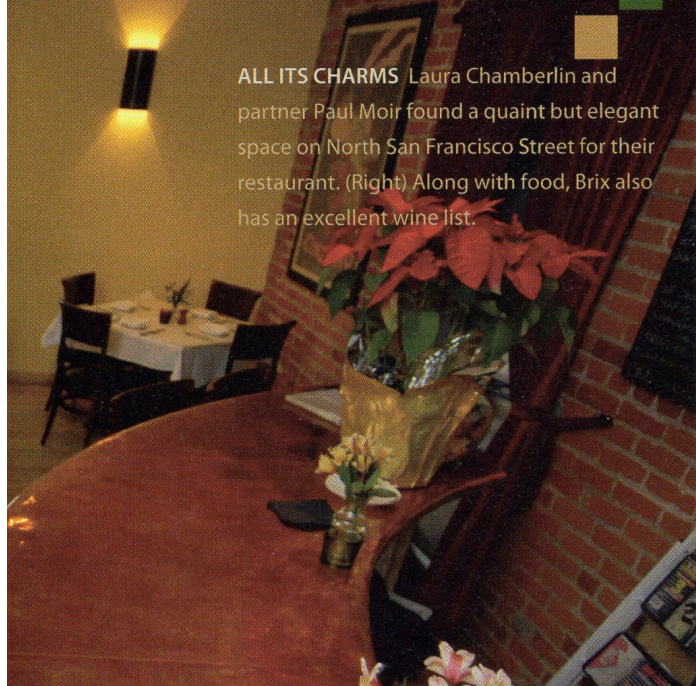
agreed on a full restaurant. Finding a location proved difficult, but Tony Cosentino of Josephine's informed the partners of a lovely spot next to an antique store, the location having formerly been a court reporter's office. Brix Restaurant and Wine Bar was born April 2006, next to Carriage House Antiques on San Francisco Street. Moir is the general manager and director of the extensive wine program, while Chamberlin rules the kitchen.

Chamberlin previously had served as a sous chef — second in charge under an executive chef or chef de cuisine — but this was her first chance to head up a kitchen. She developed her own menu from scratch. It proved a daunting, challenging, yet creative period for her. "My first menu here was a little bit of everybody I'd worked with. Now it's more of my own creations. When you have your own ability to create, you become more creative," she said.

Chamberlin eats organic at home. She embraces foods from sustainable, organic, small farms and humane meat suppliers. It became a central concept at Brix, and she and Moir use organic produce from small farms, organic wines grown in a sustainable way and natural meats humanely raised. They expend great efforts to buy locally and to focus on what is in season.

Chamberlin talks with independent producers one on one to find out what is currently at its peak. She then writes the menu to include the best foods available. "It's simply a challenge. It would be so easy to call up a big purveyor and just order the food you want, but you don't know where it comes from. I'd rather get local," she acknowledged. "You pay more and it's harder to do, but

ALL ITS CHARMS Laura Chamberlin and partner Paul Moir found a quaint but elegant space on North San Francisco Street for their restaurant. (Right) Along with food, Brix also has an excellent wine list.



customers recognize our food isn't conventional."

Chamberlin changes the full menu every three months, with smaller changes in between as current, diverse foods cross her path. This is the privilege of working with smaller, specialty farms, she says — the purveyors know her and her high standards.

When a particular product is in fine form, perhaps eggplant, she will start thinking of a special. She'll research, experiment, think about past recipes, and come up with something distinctive. Her favorite method for eggplant is to fire-roast it and make a caponata, a Sicilian dish, using zucchini, raisins, parsley and red peppers. She combines sweet, sour and smoky elements in a flavorful contrast.

Moir and Chamberlin both love cheese, as their LLC name, Stinky Cheese, reflects. "A lot of really good restaurants have a cheese program, and nowhere in Flagstaff has a quality cheese pro-



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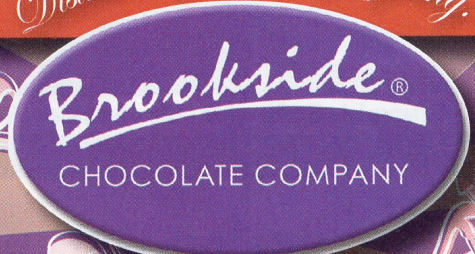
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gram. So we thought we'd put together a decent offering of cheeses, and I think we've done a great thing," she said.

Again, small, organic, local producers are key. The cheese list includes chevre from Black Mesa Ranch in Snowflake, raw milk blue cheese from Pt. Reyes Farm in California, and soft ripened goats milk ash vein from Humbolt Fog in California. Moir and Chamberlin even visited Black Mesa Ranch to meet the goats and the owners. Plans are for a goat cheese-making excursion is planned for the spring to see the process first-hand.

How to categorize Brix? Chamberlin says it's difficult, but she would call it "contemporary American, seasonal, with a lot of California-Mediterranean influence. We incorporate a lot of Italian, Spanish, some Greek, North African — we try to stay away from the heavier cream sauces; instead we go with olive oil and lemon, parsley, fresh flavor."

Chamberlin loves to experiment with different flavors, textures and temperatures — hot and cold — and she enjoys stretching her imagination to glean dishes appropriate for the seasons; light for summer, heavy for winter.

Personally, Chamberlin's greatest satisfaction is "providing good food to people. It makes it all worthwhile." She hopes people will take notice of the restaurant's commitment to organic, sustainable food production and start thinking about what they eat and buy. If people demand better products, she says, the industry will listen.

Meanwhile, Chamberlin plans to keep learning and growing as she perfects her craft. She'd like to travel to Spain, France and Italy, and to take classes or work in someone else's kitchen to stay current and have fun, with a goal of staying out of a rut and progressing in her art. "It's a lifelong process." ▲



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