

Beyond the Limits

The Demands and Joys of the Chefs at Pine Canyon



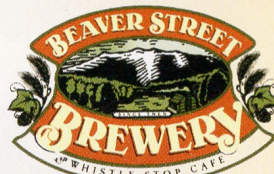
By Gamin Summers | Photos by Josh Biggs

Nestled in a forested haven off Lone Tree Road in Flagstaff is Pine Canyon Club, a high-end golf community with all of the expected amenities — immaculate landscaping, renowned golf course, luxury properties, fitness center, spa and a vast stone clubhouse. In this clubhouse resides a full-service gem of a restaurant boasting fine cuisine and picturesque views of the attending course with pond and waterfall.

Only members are allowed to dine here, though if you know someone with a membership you might ask for a guest invitation. The food is remarkable, the service impeccable. I'm told this is a "Yes" club. Your wish is their command.

Chefs Frederick Miller and Brock Rivera form a surprising team, considering they've worked together only about five months. Their combined and varied experiences bring a diverse blend to the menu's offerings. The two hit it off immediately, each said, and they enjoy a great collaborative relationship in the kitchen.

Executive chef Jim McNeill spends the busy summer season here, after which he returns to Bighorn Club in Palm Springs. Miller and Rivera, with McNeill's guidance and blessing, have created a luxury dining experience worthy of celebrities such as pro golfer Natalie Gulbis, football star Emmitt Smith and basketball coach Bobby



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Herbed Gnocchi

This is the potato pasta served with the pistachio-crusted salmon in the story. Try it with a favorite dish or sauce. Yields five six-ounce servings.

Ingredients:

- 3 Idaho potatoes — baked, peeled and diced
- 1 egg, beaten
- 1 teaspoon of salt
- 1/4 teaspoon of white pepper
- 1/2 pinch nutmeg
- 1/4 cup parmesan cheese, grated
- 1/2 teaspoon dry parsley
- 1/4 teaspoon dry thyme
- 1/4 teaspoon dry basil
- 1/4 teaspoon dry oregano
- 2 cups of all-purpose flour

Directions:

1. Cool potatoes, place in large bowl and set aside.
2. Mix the salt, eggs, nutmeg, pepper and herbs in a small bowl.
3. Place mixture into well made out of the potatoes in the large bowl.
4. Bring together the mixture with the potatoes by hand.
5. Add in cheese slowly.
6. Work in flour in steps.
7. Do not over-mix.
8. Roll the mixture out into a snake about 1/2 to 1/4-inch around.
9. Slice into 1/2 to 1/4-inch long tubes.
10. Roll, flour and freeze the pasta.
11. When ready, boil the pasta until it floats, about three to five minutes.

— Courtesy of Pine Canyon Club



Frederick Miller and Brock Rivera, chefs at Pine Canyon.

Knight.

In my brief wait to speak to Miller and Rivera, friendly servers attended to my every need. I was presented with a basket of warm, dark pumpernickel bread with white raisins and a healthy portion of lavosh, complete with a dish of individual marbles of chilled butter. I was astounded to see the vast, fully appointed kitchen in which these chefs work, often 80 hours a week during the high season. Every appliance, tool, and ingredient necessary for them to work their magic is at their disposal, including an ice cream maker and pasta machine.

"I've never been anyplace else where I've had every toy I've wanted," Miller said. And the finest quality ingredients are always at their disposal. "If you buy the best products from the best vendors, it's pretty much foolproof. You can make great food."

I sampled the pistachio crusted salmon with citrus beurre blanc served over Rivera's own recipe of herbed gnocchi. I must say that in my years dining in North Beach in San Francisco, I haven't tasted a finer gnocchi. The hand-rolled pasta, made with fresh potatoes and Parmesan cheese, accompanied Miller's tender, flavorful salmon perfectly.

I was also treated to a boatload of sushi, and not just any boat. The large, wooden boat you might find at any other sushi restaurant also had a miniature net complete with small net-weights hanging off of the end, ginger in the shape of a large rose, fresh \$89 per pound wasabi, and a small ceramic pitcher of premium soy sauce.

And the sushi was remarkable and inventive. Rivera has developed his own roll called "Surf 'n Turf" which boasts a healthy portion of fresh lobster with avocado inside the roll and strips of barely-seared, melt-in-your-mouth New York steak across the top. Also included in his "Samurai Sampler" are seared Ahi tuna nigiri and a large spider roll

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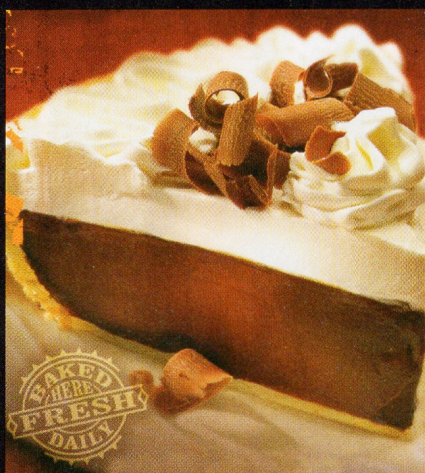
flagstaff flavor

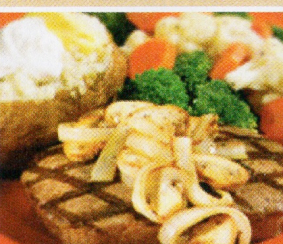


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of deep fried soft-shelled crab. Rivera's artistic bent was enhanced by earning an associates degree from the Art Institute of Phoenix two years ago, though he's quick to mention that most of his learning has come from years in the kitchen. His degree has made a difference in earnings, yet he and Miller each started working in restaurants as adolescents and credit their experiences with teaching them the trade.

When Rivera was 16, his mother's friend was the executive bakery chef at a hotel, where they were looking for a cook who knew nothing about the kitchen. He gave it a try, working there for two years and advancing from prep cook in the back to lead broiler cook at night. He worked for a luxury Marriott nursing home, kosher deli, Italian restaurant, noodle place, and the Wrigley Mansion in the valley until he "fell into" the country club scene.

Miller is just a few credits shy of earning his bachelor's in the School of Hotel and Restaurant Management at Northern Arizona University, but somehow his hours in the kitchen always get in the way. He was thrust into the restaurant business at 14 when he became chef at a seafood restaurant after the owners suddenly left town. At 16, he had a culinary apprenticeship at Skyline Country Club in Tucson.

The pros and cons of working at an exclusive club? They enjoy having regular customers, getting to know the members, and providing personalized service. The long hours during the peak season are difficult, though the chefs look forward to winter when only the occasional catered event demands their time, and they can spend more time with their families. Occasionally, being a "Yes" man is a difficult but not insurmountable challenge. Members occasionally demand unusual cuisine or accommodations for large parties at short notice, but the chefs keep a well-stocked kitchen and have a flexible attitude. Cheese for 70 in an hour? No problem.

With pristine scenery, excellent staff, and McNeill's tutelage and confidence in them, Rivera and Miller are thrilled to be working at Pine Canyon. And their passion exudes from their delicious offerings. Still, Rivera's personal favorites fall into the category of "comfort food." He loves the French dip sandwich with caramelized onions, and Miller favors the green turkey sandwich with guacamole, cream cheese, bacon and salsa. Soothing food after long hours spent pursuing their passions.

"It's a love, you know," Miller said. "It's either in your blood or it's not."

Rivera added, "You've got to have the heart for it, that's for sure." ▲