

Chef John Sharpe Elevates
the Dining at Winslow's
Turquoise Room

The Precious Turquoise

By Gamin Summers | Photos by Jill Torrance





Winslow carries small-town charms. It reveals hints of its railroad and Route 66 history. Its residents take its Fourth of July celebration seriously. It feels like a place that might have a prized local diner or a great breakfast spot. It might have an ice cream parlor on a corner that knows how to serve up a waffle cone.

Instead, Winslow has found notoriety for having some of the finest dining in northern Arizona. At the Turquoise Room in the historic La Posada Hotel, ultra-fine wines and high-end meats join regionally grown foods to create unheard-of dishes. Renowned English chef John Sharpe's fused flavors have wowed patrons, who have shared their good reviews and have sent other adventuresome diners to Winslow.

Sharpe assures me that, to this day, he has spent virtually nothing on advertising. Word of mouth goes a long way, and in this case around the world. Patrons come to his restaurant specifically for his reputation, a creative menu, the historic significance and a dining experience to rival any big city hotspot.

Renowned English chef John Sharpe is enjoying the success of the Turquoise Room.



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Farmers Market Summer Salad

Serves four

- 1 pound salad mix
- 2 ounces sunflower sprouts
- 2 ounces arugula
- 2 pounds assorted eggplant
- 2 pounds heirloom tomatoes
- 1 pound cucumbers (look for Armenian or Prince)

Basil and garlic Vinaigrette

- 2 cups of loosely packed basil leaves
- 2 cloves of fresh chopped garlic
- ½ cup seasoned rice vinegar
- ¼ cup red wine vinegar
- 2 cups extra virgin olive oil
- 1 teaspoon sea salt
- ½ teaspoon ground black pepper

Place the basil and chopped garlic in a blender or food processor with the vinegars salt and pepper. Blend till smooth and add the olive oil till the liquids have emulsified.

The dressing may be made up to 2 days ahead and kept in a sealed container in the refrigerator.

Grilled and baked eggplant

- 2 lbs eggplant
- 1-tablespoon sea salt
- Freshly ground pepper
- ½ cup extra virgin olive oil

Heirloom tomato juice

This may sound like sacrilege to some, however the final taste of the juice is what makes this salad very special.

Take one pound of the ripest tomatoes.

- ½ teaspoon sea salt

Cut into halves. Using a flat sieve, flour sieve that is set up over a bowl proceed to rub the tomato on the sieve till you have

only the skin and seeds left.

Scrape all of the puree from the bottom of the sieve and season the puree with the sea salt. Place in a sealed container till needed. This will keep for three days.

Eggplant preparation

- 2 pounds assorted small eggplant

If the eggplant is small and tender they do not need to be peeled. I like to use all kinds of shapes and sizes to make it interesting.

Cut them lengthwise and score the inside with a sharp knife in a criss cross pattern. Season them liberally with sea salt and leave them in a colander covered to drain for an hour. Wash off the salt with cold water and dry with paper towels. Marinate in the olive oil and set aside while the grill is heating up. Grill for 5 minutes on each side and then bake in the oven for 10 to 15 minutes until soft. This will vary according to the size of the eggplant. Leave out at room temperature to cool.

Assembly of the salad

Toss the greens, sunflower sprouts, and arugula in a bowl with four tablespoons of the vinaigrette.

Cut the remaining tomatoes into either slices or wedges depending on the size. Slice the cucumbers.

Mound the lettuce in the center of the plate and arrange the tomato, eggplant and cucumber around the greens.

Drizzle a little of the dressing over the tomatoes and the cucumbers. Drizzle the tomato juice over the eggplant and splash it on the plate for visual effect. Finish with freshly ground pepper and serve with nice warm crusty bread and a small dish of extra virgin olive oil with a splash of balsamic vinegar in it to dip the bread.

This will make a great lunch dish or a light dinner. A cheese platter would be the perfect addition for a great dinner.

— Recipe appears courtesy of John Sharpe

Renowned architect and interior designer Mary Colter designed the original Turquoise Room — a private dining car for the Super Chief that ran from Chicago to Los Angeles in 1936. The renovated dining room, now a part of La Posada Hotel, recreates the elegant railroad dining experience with leather and wooden chairs, brocade booths, chandeliers and a stained-glass mural of La Posada Patron saints Ysidro, Pascual and Barbara.

Owners Allan Affeldt and Tina Mion convinced Sharpe to join them in their plans to restore the dilapidated hotel, right at about the time Sharpe and his wife were ready for a change from their successful but hectic southern California lifestyle. Right away, Sharpe and the Turquoise Room enjoyed great press and reviews from the likes of *Arizona Highways*, *Sunset Magazine* and the *New York Times*. Sharpe's commitment to indigenous foods, locally grown produce and what he terms "honest, basic, alluring food" create an experience to which he intends to stay true.

My first personal encounter with Sharpe involved lunch, and I brought a friend along for the drive. We sat near a window in the beautiful, rustic dining room and tried to contain our ravings about everything we tasted.

The homemade rolls were heavenly, but our appetizer of Piki Bread with Hopi Hummus was our first introduction to Sharpe's indigenous offerings. Piki is a Hopi bread made with blue corn, ash and water spread thinly on a hot rock then rolled, creating a paper-like, crispy tube matching perfectly his version of hummus. He uses reservation-grown tepary beans, pit-roasted corn, olive oil and pumpkins seeds to create a smooth, flavorful accompaniment to the wafer-like bread.

My Niçoise salad was delicate with tender spring greens, seared tuna, marinated sweet-sour vegetables including delicious tiny onions and a sprinkling of spicy radish sprouts. Two-toned, half-corn half-bean soup was surprisingly flavorful considering the simplicity of its ingredients. The mesquite flour in the dessert scone added an earthy-smoky flavor for a not-too-sweet surprise.

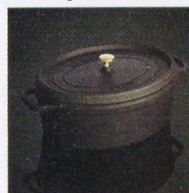
Sharpe had encouraged me to experience dinner, so when my dad came from Boston I made a second trip. My father has dined around the world, so I knew his opinion would be valuable in contrast to



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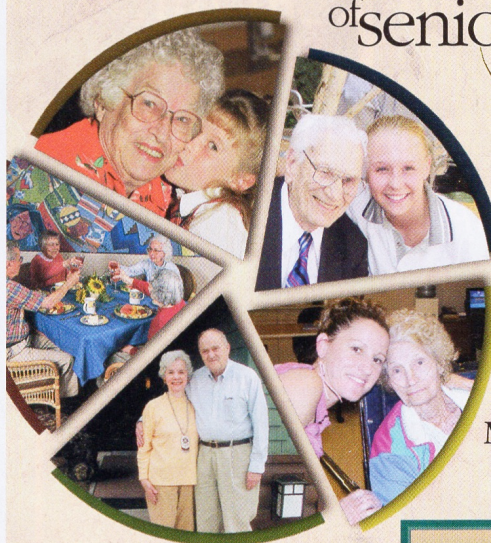
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my palate. I explained the history before we arrived, but said little about the food except to mention Sharpe's specialty of incorporating the indigenous plants of the desert and foods of Native American cultures.

One of the first things we both noticed, on a typically busy evening when the only reservation we could obtain was at 5 p.m., was the unusual noiselessness in a packed dining room. We made our own observation that the patrons were focused more on the cuisine, less on conversation.

We wanted to experience as much variety as possible, so we ordered the Native Cas-soulet with Goat Chop, Duck Leg and Elk Sausage. We also opted for the Wild-Wild-Wild West Sampler Platter, which includes grilled quail with prickly pear jalapeno glaze, seared elk medallion with blackcurrant sauce, and a chili made of venison, buffalo, wild boar and scarlet runner bean.

The glaze perfectly accompanied the



quail, neither erring on the side of spiciness or sweetness. The elk matched well with the blackcurrant sauce and was surprisingly tender. The combination of so many meats was actually an intensely satisfying experience. Upon leaving, we noted that we felt pleasantly full, not stuffed, and we relished the diversity we had experienced.

And I must mention the peach dessert with mesquite syrup. Peaches in June? I was skeptical, yet the server assured me that Sharpe had somehow obtained some ripe, white-fleshed peaches from a special source.

The peaches might as well have dropped in an August orchard. The mesquite syrup solidified my newfound passion for that particular flavor. As before, the dessert was not too sweet and offered a balance of taste, texture and variety — the perfect finish.

Sharpe noted, "I don't do anything trendy. I don't compete — I'm not trying to do what others are doing.

I do what I want to do — my own thing. I've been a very lucky person; I always knew I would do this. I've always done what I've enjoyed." His plans for the future? "To keep doing what I do best — cook. I plan to evolve slowly as I stay true to indigenous foods."

He, Affeldt and Mion have begun a new restoration project on the historic El Garces Harvey House and Train Depot, originally built in 1908 in Needles, Calif. Sharpe asserts, however, that he will stay in Winslow. An undeniable blessing for northern Arizona's culinary landscape. ▲

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