



## As Puck Would Have It

by Lori Midson

**The debut in Bachelor Gulch of a new Spago, the crown jewel in Wolfgang Puck's culinary empire, burnishes Colorado's already lustrous restaurant scene.**

### **Spago**

**The Ritz-Carlton, Bachelor Gulch; 0130 Daybreak Ridge, Avon; 970-343-1555; [wolfgangpuck.com](http://wolfgangpuck.com)**

"This is going to be the most perfect hotel-restaurant combination in America," says Wolfgang Puck, the Austrian-born superstar chef whose litany of insatiably popular restaurants has made him an icon in esteemed culinary circles throughout the United States. Heavy-hitting words, to be sure, but with Puck's recent unveiling of Spago at the lofty Ritz-Carlton, Bachelor Gulch—easily one of Colorado's most highly anticipated openings of 2007—we take him at his word, especially considering his past accomplishments, which include six cookbooks and more fine-dining restaurants, catering operations and fast-casual outlets than you can shake a whisk at. The Spago team—Puck, Executive Chef Mark Ferguson and renowned New York-based interior designer Tony Chi—has created a spectacular-looking restaurant that's a head-turning combination of modern Manhattan chic and rustic Rocky Mountain elegance. Ferguson, who has worked with Puck since the mid-90s, is confident, ambitious and enthusiastic, especially when it comes to Spago's contemporary, seasonally inspired menu, an expensive roster of swoon-worthy dishes that hopscotch from handmade pumpkin agnolotti and ricotta gnocchi with lamb Bolognese to splendid breakfast offerings like the corned beef hash eggs Benedict and truffled parmesan polenta crowned with yolky organic eggs. "I love experimenting with food, and Wolfgang gives me the freedom to cook what I what, whenever I want," say Ferguson. "My menu has no boundaries."

**Showstoppers:** At brunch, it's the corned beef hash eggs Benedict bolstered by fresh spinach and a decadently creamy Béarnaise sauce that sends me into euphoria, while the pan-roasted venison "filet mignon" sided with a sweet-potato shepherd's pie makes a bold statement at dinner.

**More favorites:** Sesame-miso tuile cones tumbling with tuna tartare; roasted beet and warm goat-cheese layer cake haloed with toasted hazelnuts; pan-roasted duck breast in a port-licorice reduction pelted with wild huckleberries.

**Just desserts:** Pastry chef Ryan Witcher's sticky toffee pudding glazed with butterscotch caramel is beyond reproach.

**Mood:** A scenester crowd of moneyed locals, A-list celebrities, perfectly coiffed tourists and schmoozing snow-bunny stunners garbed in the latest designer fashions.

**Prime time:** After the last outdoor adventure of the day, when the bar and lounge turn into a rollicking après ski party, or at sunset, when the dining room, walled with black-and-white Colorado landscape murals, deep-red tapestries and starburst orange hues, takes on an atmospheric glow.

**Side show:** The views from the window tables, overlooking the snow-carpeted mountains beyond, are so mesmerizing that it's far too easy to linger while dreaming the day away.

**Family circle:** A limed-oak harvest table, which doubles as a community gathering place for large groups and solo diners, sits directly in front of the expansive exhibition kitchen, giving you a voyeuristic view into chef Mark Ferguson's gastronomic stage.

**Rant:** Love the undeniably stylish brown and crème-colored cowhide upholstered chairs, but the rigidly straight backs aren't particularly comfortable.

## **10 restaurants worth checking out this spring**

### **The Crushery**

This high-ceilinged panini palace, tricked out with exposed brick, polished hardwood floors, cocoa-colored leather chairs and shelves of diverse reading material, is South Pearl Street's newest noshery, a hustle and bustle operation whose playful menu makes the most out of "crushing" house-baked bagels and sandwiches on a panini press. The menu, displayed on the wall using a film projector, also includes salads, sauces and dressings (chive ranch, chipotle aioli and roasted garlic), alongside bacon and brie croutons, cheesecake cream cheese and jams and spreads. **1579 S.**

**Pearl St.; 303-733-4117; crushery.com**

### **Encore**

It was a long time coming, but Encore, the latest restaurant foray to snatch up space in the historic Lowenstein Theatre cultural complex, finally made its splashy debut late last year, attracting well-heeled barflies and foodophiles with its upstaging, narrow space furnished with repurposed and recycled materials (the tables were constructed from old gymnasium bleachers), a piano bar and globetrotting menu that journeys through Morocco, Mexico, Italy and the Americas. **2550 E. Colfax**

**Ave.; 303-355-1112; encoreoncolfax.com**

### **Fisher Clark Deli**

If you want to eat in at this catchall of excellent sandwiches, prepared foods, artisan breads, decadent bakery goods and specialty food items, be prepared to wage war for one of the four

stools, almost always occupied and inconveniently located next to the utensil tray, water dispenser and coffee thermoses. Instead, order your muffuletta, layered with salami, provolone, capicollo and chopped olive salad, to go, and for dessert, elevate your caloric intake with the mind-altering carrot cake. **723 S. University Blvd.; 303-722-2091; fisherclarkdeli.com**

### **Flix Café**

The consulting chef and menu master is James Mazzio, a *Food & Wine* magazine Best New Chef winner. The roster of dishes includes a cheese board, Vietnamese egg rolls, blackened fish tacos and braised lamb shank stew. From your plush leatherette stadium-style seat, you can view a documentary or classic film projected onto the wall, while the snazzy lounge and bar area pulsates with an infectious vibe and the cushy leather loveseats encourage loitering. Finally! A chic and contemporary in-house cinema restaurant that understands savvy move-goers want more than Sugar Babies and buttered popcorn. **2510 E. Colfax Ave.; 303-777-3549; neighborhoodflix.com/cafe.asp**

### **Jing**

Restaurateur Charlie Huang, whose venerable Little Ollie's is one of Cherry Creek's most populated dining dens, recently launched Jing, a stupefyingly gorgeous Asian food temple in the newly opened, high-end Landmark project in Greenwood Village. The dining room, embellished with leather, ornate vases and a high ceiling draped with cascading white fabric, makes a sweeping statement, as does the Buddha Drop cocktail, a concoction of vodka, fresh lemon juice, limoncello, and a sansho button, a lip-numbing, tongue-tingling, deceptively innocent flowering pepper nub that rockets your palate into shock waves. **5370 Greenwood Plaza Blvd., Greenwood Village; 303-779-6888; jingrestaurant.com**

### **Limelight Supper Club & Lounge**

Just when you thought power-chef Kevin Taylor couldn't possibly add another restaurant to his exploding empire, he does exactly that, taking over the execrable Theater Café just adjacent to the Denver Center for the Performing Arts complex and revamping it into a hip and modernly minimalist space flanked by a wall of windows and a seasonally shifting menu finessed with elegant starters like oysters on the half shell, caviar, butter-poached lobster and hearty main dishes such as braised short ribs, pork chops and rack of lamb. **14<sup>th</sup> & Curtis; 720-227-9984; coloradoeats.com/limelight/restaurant.htm**

### **Osteria Marco**

Chef/owner Frank Bonanno has been an innovative, aggressive and outspoken culinary genius on the Denver food scene since he opened Mizuna in 2001. His Osteria Marco, in Larimer Square, keeps tables turning day and night, thanks to the indelible chef-driven Italian dishes—thin-crust, artisan pizzas smeared with San Marzano tomatoes; panini; antipasti; and wonderful house-made cheeses like the rhapsodic burrata—parading from the clamorous kitchen. The Sunday-night pig roasts are a huge draw, a swine and dine affair that makes you feel as though you're in hog heaven. **1453 Larimer St.; 303-534-5855; osteriamarco.com**

### **Tibet's Restaurant**

Purposefully peaceful and elementally relaxing, with a stone waterfall, gas fireplace and a silent slide show detailing the life of the Dali Lama, this East Asian temple of Zen celebrates the food of India and Tibet. Dishes are mellow and non-threatening, but gratifyingly satisfying and ample: a creamy, unassailable sag paneer; Tibetan noodles bobbing with fresh vegetables and lamb; and hearty stews brimming with potatoes and yak meat. Tiger rugs hang from the walls, a symbol of protection, and an array of map-spanning wines and Asian beers are displayed at the bar. **321 McCaslin Blvd., Louisville; 303-665-2557; tibetsrestaurant.com**

### **Wasabi Sushi Bar**

Slicker than a fish out of water, this stunningly appointed sushi stop in the Belmar neighborhood with its perfectly round, glammed-up, glassed facade, is far more SoHo than St. Louis, Mo., which is where owner/chef Jong Lee first hooked raw-fish fans on his pristine sushi and sashimi. The engaging waitstaff and sushi chefs go out of their way in the welcome-wagon department, and the happy-hour deals are unbeatable (\$1 hot sake; \$2 wasabi bombs; 2-for-1 sushi and rolls). If you're in a death-defying mood, the Japan-born Lee is one of just a handful of sushi chefs in the country board-certified to serve fugu, a specific species of blowfish that if not properly cleaned and detoxified can kill you with one bite. Think about it: When was the last time you had sushi to die for? **433 S. Teller St.; 303-935-8888.**

### **Wine Experience Café & World Cellar**

When chef Matthew Franklin relinquished his long-lasting kitchen gig at Lakewood's 240 Union, devoted loyalists panicked. Calm down, people; Franklin is back behind the burner at this new southeast suburban restaurant—admittedly a long way from Lakewood—that takes on triple duty. There's a wine shop for stocking up on boutique bottlings, a vino bar for sipping and swirling, and an intimate dining room for supping on Franklin's market-driven cuisine: blue cheese soufflé; lobster corn fritters; porcini-crusting filet mignon; pork loin rubbed with aromatic Indian spices. In other words, he's back. **6240 S. Main St., Aurora; 303-690-1025; wineexperiencecafe.com**

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