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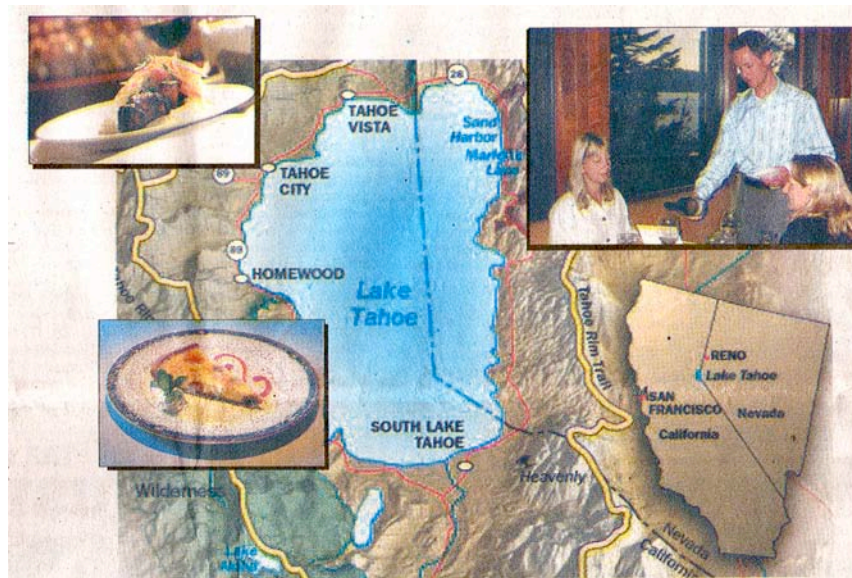
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## Tri-Valley Herald

# Lake Tahoe

■ Enjoy excellent California cuisine from North to South

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NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC — Map Illustration

**MAKING YOUR WAY:** Tahoe's food scene has had an impressive makeover. On the North Shore, chef Mark Estee (top) at Moody's Bistro & Lounge serves fresh, seasonal, sustainable foods, such as Niman Ranch braised short ribs (above left). At Wild Goose, the sommelier pours expensive fine wines (above right) to pair with the restaurant's haute cuisine. The South Shore may still be packed with chain restaurants and casino buffets, but restaurants such as Evan's American Gourmet Cafe, with its legendary creme brulée tart (bottom left), are giving diners something new to sink their teeth into.



**'F**OR six days, you shall eat," I was commanded by my editor. "Morning, noon and night, you shall put food into your mouth and consider its flavor, texture and color. Thou shalt not count calories."

Resigned to the probability that I would gain weight, I piled the family into the car and headed for Lake Tahoe, with a plan to eat my way from one end of the lake to the other. The goal: To uncover the area's true culinary personality.

I ate fancy meals served in dining rooms awash in sparkly lights. I ate on the beach. I ate standing up and sitting down. I ate hot food, cold food, fast food and slow food. In the end, I discovered that Lake Tahoe's best is an extension of everything that is right with California cuisine: Simple food made with seasonal, local produce.

From Plumpjack's classic bistro, Balboa Cafe, in Squaw Valley to Edgewood Tahoe at South Shore, Lake Tahoe is fast earning a reputation as a place to enjoy great food as well as great skiing, hiking and entertainment. The area even has an annual culinary festival and competition in the fall.

"The reality is that the food scene in the Tahoe area has come a long way in the last 20 years," says Ed Coleman, owner of two restaurants in Truckee. "There used to be mostly continental food and fondue places in North Shore. South Shore was known for the fast food and traffic."

Change has been gradual, he says, but deliberate. The most successful restaurants in the area are those catering to the changing Tahoe demo-

graphic, a much younger, more affluent crowd than it was 30 years ago.

Today's customers expect the best, Coleman says. "Our clientele here is very savvy. They want the same fresh, high-quality food that they get in the Bay Area."

Coleman, owner of Pacific Crest and Pianeta, both in downtown Truckee, says restaurants have improved all over the Lake, but the biggest strides, in his opinion, have been in North Tahoe, particularly Truckee.

"Years ago, we had Wolfedale's and Christy Hill. Those were the only two really big names that were getting publicity. Now you have good restaurants everywhere, but on the South Shore, there's just a lot of competition with

casino buffets.

"What you find in Truckee is the kind of resort village that you find in Aspen or Telluride. There are shops and historic buildings and restaurants with a kind of progressive vibe. The food is adventurous, a little edgy."

Moody's Bistro & Lounge in Truckee, for example, is modeled after Chez Panisse in Berkeley, with a strong emphasis on fresh produce, meat, poultry and cheese — all from Cali-

fornia — plus a splash of live jazz music just for fun.

The food at Moody's is so seasonal that the menu changes daily. When owners J.J. Morgan and Chef Mark Estee opened the restaurant three years ago, their concept was considered slightly bizarre and out-of-place.

"When we first opened up, I would say we were a little ahead of our time," Estee says. "Back then, the only identifiable food style here in Lake Tahoe

seemed to be the sort of stodgy, old-fashioned prime rib and Yorkshire pudding meals you might have at a casino."

Estee and Morgan bought fresh produce and meats from the nearby Sierra and Sacramento valleys. They sought out California's top cheesemakers. They hooked up with the nation's best grass-fed beef ranchers, duck farmers and seafood suppliers who deliver fish

Please see **TAHOE**, Living 3

Cuisine takes on California freshness on north, south shores



## ► **TAHOE**, from Living 1

within hours of being pulled from the ocean.

With those ingredients, they build ethereal meals. Cowgirl Creamery's Mt. Tam cheese becomes a tart with figs and caramelized onions; fresh cauliflower is puréed and served with fresh grilled sturgeon. Niman Ranch pork chops rest on a sweet potato cake, with blue cheese-stuffed figs tucked around.

"We're doing it different," Estee says. "I consider it my job to break every single rule. I like to be the restaurant where people expect to see what they don't get anywhere else. That gives us freedom to be more creative with our menu."

Also eliciting rave reviews is Wild Goose restaurant in Tahoe Vista, a restaurant serving haute-cuisine right on the water. There, Chef Dale Ray and his team treat every plate of food as a work of art.

Ray orchestrates the seamless presentation — ensuring that three drops of oil and a single parsley leaf grace each spoon of cold soup served as an amuse-bouche at the beginning of the meal.

Among his signature dishes is veal tenderloin wrapped in the most perfectly smoked ham, served with two kinds of plum sauce. For the gourmand, there are baby vegetables cooked "sous vide" (in vacuum packages, preserving all aroma and flavor), then served with truffle-infused cream inside an eggshell. If those don't please, try the sea scallops in English pea purée and mushroom-crusted sea bass.

"At our restaurant, we have a passion for fresh ingredients," Ray says. "We get the same mushrooms as The French Laundry. We get the same lamb as Wolfgang Puck uses. We want every dish to be perfect."

"Our philosophy is to keep things simple but complicated. I mean, we serve baby vegetables, but we peel them very carefully, then we cook them for an hour and a half instead of just throwing them into a pan."

"For us, it's about perfection."

North Tahoe visitors who aren't quite up for the white tablecloth meal experience (and price tag), especially at lunchtime, may be impressed with two places we visited — Piper's Patisserie in Truckee and Christy Hill in Tahoe City.

Piper's is an upscale deli that serves breads and quiche in the morning, and salads, sandwiches and other satisfying dishes throughout the day. Christy Hill is a pretty restaurant with an interesting dinner menu, but an even better cafe menu. The chef's smoked chipotle chile relleno stuffed with smoked chicken is legendary.

Another wildly popular San

Francisco-style eatery is Plumpjack's Balboa Cafe in the Village at Squaw, which serves steak frites, ceviches, gratins, braises and other hearty fare. Chef Alex Olson says he notices very little difference between his clientele and those he used to serve in the Bay Area.

"Basically, we gear our restaurant for the Bay Area crowd. We do fun plates, but we know how the Bay Area likes their fish cooked (rare), and how they like their vegetables cooked (crisp)."

As anyone who has visited in Tahoe knows, the distance between North Shore and South Shore is huge — especially in terms of ambience. South Shore is packed with familiar chain restaurants clustered near the casinos and ski resorts, including Cold Stone Creamery, Subway, Chevy's Fresh Mex, Hard Rock Cafe, Wolfgang Puck Express, even a Nestle's Toll House Cafe.

There are also a multitude of nice eateries, so many that it's hard to choose. As I had only two nights to eat, I had to select very carefully. Edgewood Tahoe, the landmark restaurant on the golf course that skirts the lake, was my first choice.

The entire restaurant faces a giant window that overlooks the lake, which is stunning at sunset. Chef Bobby King's menu has something for everybody; ostrich and elk for the daring, chicken for the non-adventurous, crab-stuffed prawns for me.

Dishes are skillfully seasoned and presented, but the standout was the chicken stuffed with spinach, mushrooms, jalapeño jack cheese and roasted bell pepper.

On another evening, I made a reservation to eat at posh little Evan's American Gourmet Cafe, a tiny house that serves ultra-elegant dishes. The dining room twinkles with tiny lights and flowers. The noise level is low, which makes it perfect for conversation, not so perfect for young children.

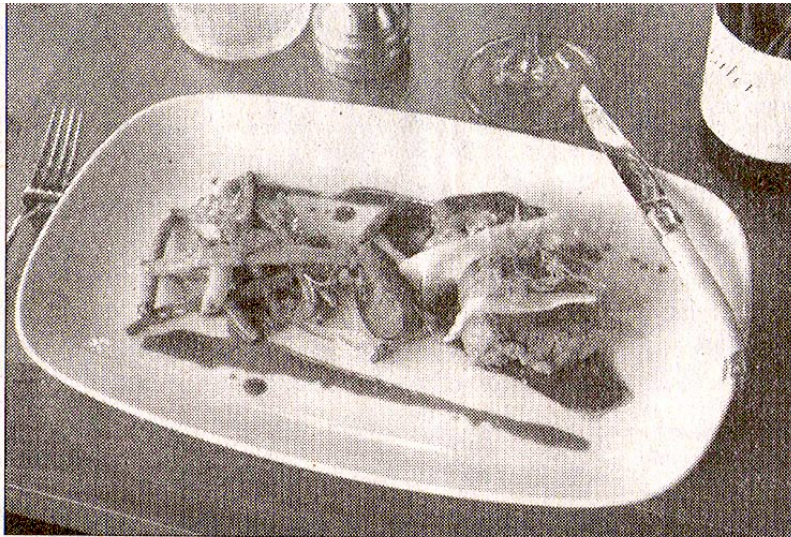
The night I visited, the chef was new, and still learning to negotiate the close kitchen. But the food was stellar, especially the corn bisque. It wasn't until the end of my meal, however, that I discovered that the best reason to come to Evan's is for dessert.

The dessert menu is vast, with at least nine options every night. Pastry chef Mary Ward makes it her business to tempt every guest.

"We are known for our desserts. We like to have a little bit of everything," she says. Ward, who has been dessert queen at the restaurant for eight years, changes her menu often, making room for her latest inspirations.

"I like to be adventurous," she says. "I read magazines and taste different things. I tried a chocolate ice cream with red pepper in it. It was really great. I made a banana bread pudding





**MASTERPIECE:** Chef Dale Ray strives for perfection at Wild Goose restaurant on Lake Tahoe's North Shore. He treats each dish, such as this veal tenderloin with pear purée and baby veggies, as a work of art.

with croissants that is a favorite with the men."

Even more unexpected are her basil or Brie ice creams, which are always tested out on the restaurant's owners and employees before being added to the menu. Some of her creations, such as the creme brûlée tart, are so popular that they have become signature desserts rarely absent from the dessert lineup.

1 cup mushrooms, diced  
 1 cup tomatoes, diced  
 1 cup onion, diced  
 1 cup celery, diced  
 1 cup carrots, diced  
 1 cup leeks, diced  
 2 tablespoons garlic, minced  
 2 tablespoons shallots, minced  
 4 cups Zinfandel  
 3 cups veal stock  
 Creamy Polenta (recipe follows)

After four days of eating large, I was ready to throw down my fork and surrender. It was just too much good food.

But after a rigorous bicycle ride around Camp Richardson, I found myself at the entrance to The Beacon Bar & Grill, right on the beach next to the Camp Richardson pier. Not the usual beach burger joint, The Beacon serves fresh fare, including salads with a minimum of dressing, broiled salmon, ceviche tostados and a generous, saucy plate of smoked chicken pesto linguine.

The best end to a meal at The Beacon is a thick slice of blueberry cheesecake, so popular that it is served year-round.

For years, I have balked at the idea of eating out in Tahoe, convinced that the offerings would be typical tourist fare, overpriced and lacking in taste. The next time you find yourself in Lake Tahoe and hungry, tuck in for a bite and see just how wrong I was.

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### **Zinfandel Braised Niman Ranch Short Ribs with Creamy Polenta**

*Recipe from Chef Mark Estee at Moody's Bistro & Lounge, Truckee.*

**Flour**  
**Salt**  
**Pepper**  
**1 bunch fresh thyme, stems removed**  
**5 pounds Niman Ranch short ribs**  
**4 tablespoons grapeseed oil (or cooking oil)**  
**Braising Liquid:**  
**1 bunch thyme**  
**2 fresh bay leaves**  
**1 bunch rosemary**

► In a bowl, combine flour, salt, pepper and thyme leaves. Coat short ribs in the flour mixture and set aside. Heat grapeseed (or other cooking oil) in a large heavy-bottomed pan. Add floured short ribs and brown well on all four sides. You may have to do this in batches. Place short ribs in a large heavy-bottomed Dutch oven.

In the same pan that the short ribs have been browned, wipe out excess flour and oil. Add all the herbs and vegetables and cook slowly to caramelize. When caramelized, set aside 1 cup of the vegetables for garnish.

Add Zinfandel to the remaining vegetables, and cook until reduced by 25 percent. Add veal stock. Bring to a boil and pour liquid over the short ribs. Cover and bake in oven at 325 degrees for 2½ hours. Remove from oven and let the meat rest for about 20 minutes in the liquid. Remove short ribs. Strain sauce and put it back on stove. Taste and adjust salt and pepper if necessary and serve with short ribs over creamy polenta. Garnish with reserved vegetables. Serves 8.

*Nutrition information could not be calculated.*

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### **Creamy Polenta**

**1 cup milk**  
**3 cups chicken stock**  
**1 cup polenta**  
**Salt and pepper to taste**  
**1 cup goat cheese**  
**½ cup flat-leaf parsley, chopped**

► In a saucepan, mix milk, stock, polenta, salt and pepper. Bring to simmer and cook, whisking



frequently, for 20 minutes. Remove from heat and add goat cheese and chopped parsley. Serves 8.

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**Per Serving:** 217 Calories; 6g Fat; 9g Protein; 29g Carbohydrate; 4g Dietary Fiber; 19mg Cholesterol; 871mg Sodium.

## **Veal Tenderloin with Pear Purée and Baby Veggies**

*Recipe provided by Chef Dale Ray of Wild Goose in Tahoe Vista.*

### **Pear Purée:**

**4 pears**

**½ cup water**

**½ cup sugar**

**½ vanilla bean**

**½ cinnamon stick**

**Juice of one lemon**

### **Baby vegetables:**

**1 quart water**

**¼ cup salt**

**1 bunch baby carrots, cleaned**

**1 bunch baby turnips, cleaned**

**½ pound French beans, cleaned**

**¼ cup olive oil**

**Sea salt and fresh pepper, to taste**

### **Veal:**

**4 (7-ounce) veal tenderloins**

### **To finish:**

**1 tablespoon butter**

**1 tablespoon chopped parsley**

**½ cup veal demi-glace (can be purchased at gourmet food stores)**

**4 ounces country ham, sliced thin**

► **Pear purée:** Peel and core pears, then chop into small pieces. Place the pears in a heavy-bottomed pot with the water, sugar, vanilla bean, cinnamon stick and lemon juice. Cook over medium heat until pears are almost dry and falling apart. Remove cinnamon stick and vanilla bean. Puree pears in a blender and set aside.

**Vegetables:** Bring the water and salt to boil. Add vegetables, and cook approximately 5 minutes or until al dente. Remove, rinse under cold water and set aside.

**Veal:** Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Using a heavy-bottom sauté pan, heat it until very hot. Add olive oil. Season veal on all sides with salt and pepper. Place in pan, cook on all sides until golden brown. Place veal in preheated oven for approximately 4 minutes to finish cooking. Remove, set in warm place to rest for approximately 3 minutes.

**Vegetables:** Warm vegetables in a tablespoon of butter. Season with salt and pepper, and toss with chopped parsley.

In a separate pan, bring demi-glace to a simmer. Reduce heat. To serve, place 1 tablespoon of pear purée on a plate. Slice each portion of veal into 3 pieces. Form a sideways sandwich by placing a thin piece of country ham in between each piece. Place on top of pear purée. Add 1 portion of baby vegetables to each plate. Sauce the veal with 1

tablespoon of demi-glace.  
Serves 4.

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**Per Serving:** 720 Calories;  
34g Fat; 45g Protein; 58g Car-  
bohydrate; 6g Dietary Fiber;  
187mg Cholesterol; 735mg  
Sodium.

## Crème Brûlée Tart

*Recipe from Mary Ward,  
pastry chef at Evan's Amer-  
ican Gourmet Cafe, South  
Lake Tahoe.*

### **Crust:**

**2 packages graham crackers,  
processed to fine crumbs.**

**$\frac{1}{4}$  cup melted butter**

### **Custard:**

**7 egg yolks**

**1 cup sour cream**

**7 tablespoons sugar**

**2 cups whipping cream**

**1 vanilla bean**

**1 teaspoon vanilla extract**

### **Assembly:**

**3 ounces good quality dark or  
semi-sweet chocolate**

**1 pint fresh raspberries or  
blackberries**

**3 tablespoons sugar**

► **To make the crust:** Preheat oven to 350 degrees. In a bowl, mix together the graham cracker crumbs and butter. The crumbs should be moist and hold together. Press mixture evenly into the bottom and sides of an 11-inch tart pan with a removable bottom. Bake crust in preheated oven for 9 minutes. Remove from oven and cool completely.

**To make the custard:** In a metal bowl, whisk together the egg yolks, sour cream and sugar. Add the whipping cream, vanilla bean and vanilla extract. Cook mixture over a water bath until it becomes thick custard. Strain custard into clean bowl and allow to cool until warm, approximately 10 minutes.

Meanwhile, melt the chocolate and spread it evenly into the cooled crust. Place the raspberries on top. When custard has cooled a bit, pour it over the berries and smooth the top. Place in refrigerator until thoroughly chilled.

► **To Serve:** Remove tart from refrigerator. Remove the outer ring and sprinkle the top with the sugar. Using a small brûlée torch, caramelize top until sugar turns hard and amber brown. If you do not have a torch, place the tart under a preheated broiler. Be careful or the broiler may heat the custard and cause it to soften significantly.

Allow tart to set for a few minutes before slicing. Another option is to slice it beforehand and caramelize each slice individually (which is how we do it at the restaurant). Serves 10-12.

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**Per Serving:** 650 Calories;  
41g Fat; 8g Protein; 65g Car-  
bohydrate; 3g Dietary Fiber;  
218mg Cholesterol; 505mg  
Sodium.

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