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THE GRUB HUNTER

Getting to know you



Chef Nathaniel Tuazon's dish shrimp with cauliflower couscous.

Chef Nathaniel Tuazon develops a personal bond with his diners at Forest Hill senior living community

Very rarely does a professional chef develop a personal bond with diners, the physical and emotional wall of the kitchen standing firmly in the way.



Mike Hale

Not so with chef Nathaniel Tuazon, who prepares breakfast, lunch and dinner for the same guests, day after day, 365 days a year.

Tuazon runs the kitchen at Forest Hill, a full-service senior living community on Gibson Avenue in Pacific Grove, serving upscale food in a grand dining room along with the more casual Courtyard Cafe.

Among one of the last graduating classes (2009) at the now-defunct Monterey Culinary Center, Tuazon recognized a unique opportunity for an aspiring chef. "In a typical restaurant, if you have a bad experience, chances are the chef will not see that person again in the dining room," he said. "At Forest Hill, we get to know them personally. We come to know their likes and dislikes."

From knowing how much lemonade they prefer in their Arnold Palmers, to remembering complex dietary restrictions,

the staff at Forest Hill caters to the needs of hundreds of residents and their guests.

"It becomes like one big family," he said. "Our dining service staff sometimes feel like their extended grandchildren."

Make no mistake, Tuazon does not dumb down his food. He serves a wide selection of options, including a recent special — slow-cooked, pork shoulder ragu in aromatic wine and tomatoes, served with butter-fried potato gnocchi topped with shaved prosciutto and Parmesan. Residents also rave about his shrimp with cauliflower "couscous."

At a senior living facility?

Of course, there is always a selection of salads, fresh fruit and a vegetable of the day. But Tuazon pushes the boundaries, often stamping the menu with his cultural flair.

Born in the Philippines before landing in Salinas as a young boy, a budding chef learned at the apron strings of his mother. "She was the biggest influence on me growing up," Tuazon said. "I would always see her preparing classic Filipino dishes from the region of Pampanga, Luzon. This had a big impact on me."

Every so often Tuazon sprinkles the menu with Filipino staples such as chicken adobo, arroz caldo and pancit.



Chef Nathaniel Tuazon of Forest Hill retirement home.

"These are some of the mainstream dishes that Filipinos are known for," he said. "All I have to do is rename them to let residents know what they are eating. For example, chicken adobo becomes soy-braised chicken. We've had some really positive responses." Forest Hill resident Jane

Leatham spent a 38-year career teaching first and second grade at nearby Forest School, retiring in 2006. She sold her Carmel Valley home in 2014 for the comfort and social interaction at Forest Hill, the first continuing care retirement community on the Monterey Peninsula.

HALE » PAGE 5

Heart Health



CONTRIBUTED

Cauliflower Steak with Nopalitos Con Rajas en Salsa Verde.

February is Heart Health Month and Chef Jason Giles, Executive Chef and Manager of Nutrition Services at Salinas Valley Memorial Healthcare System is sharing some of his favorite heart-healthy recipes each week of the month.

Cauliflower Steak with Nopalitos Con Rajas en Salsa Verde

Serves 4

INGREDIENTS

- 4 cups cleaned nopales cactus, sliced into strips
- Salt
- Water
- 1 pound tomatillos
- 5 serrano peppers
- 1 clove garlic
- 2 poblanos roasted, peeled and sliced into 2 poblanos roasted, peeled and sliced into rajas (strips)
- 2 Anaheim peppers roasted, peeled and sliced into rajas (strips)

DIRECTIONS

1 : Using a small sharp knife, carefully shave or remove the needles from the cactus paddles. Slice into strips and rinse well under cold water. Combine the nopales with 1 teaspoon of salt in a sauce pan. Cover with water, bring to a boil, reduce heat and cook for 6 to 8 minutes. Drain and again rinse well under cold water.

2 : In another saucepan, add tomatillos, half of the onion and all of the serrano peppers. Cover with water, bring to a boil, reduce to simmer and cook for 10 to 15 minutes. Drain all of the water and transfer to the blender. Add garlic and 3/4 teaspoon of salt or to taste. Blend on high until smooth; set aside.

3 : Preheat a large skillet with 2 tablespoons of olive oil to medium heat for a few minutes. Slice the remaining onion into thin strips. Add to skillet and cook for 3 minutes. Add the rajas and nopales and cook for another few minutes. Add half of the salsa from blender to the skillet. Cook at a low simmer for 10 minutes.

Cauliflower Steak

INGREDIENTS

- 1 head cauliflower, cut into 1 inch thick slices
- 1 teaspoon minced garlic
- 2 tablespoon olive oil
- Pinch of black pepper
- 1/8 teaspoon kosher salt

DIRECTIONS

1 : Heat a large skillet on med-high heat. On a sheet pan place cauliflower steaks and drizzle with oil, garlic and seasonings. Rub oil and spices into the cauliflower to help coat. Carefully place a steak into the hot skillet; repeat until pan is full. Sear the cauliflower for 1 minute, flip and continue to cook for 2 minutes. Steaks should

Hale

FROM PAGE 4

Leatham believes the food is a huge part of the Forest Hill lifestyle.

"Our chef is providing us with good food and the ability to interact with other residents," she said. "There's a lot of laughter and chatter."

Much of the food is served buffet style, making it easy for residents to choose the food they want in portions suitable to them.

"We always have a choice of two main dishes, a salad bar, veggies, and a rice or potato dish," she said. "Personally I like the different fish choices Nate provides us, especially salmon, trout and fresh crab."

Yes, diet restrictions come into play, but it's not the main challenge for Tuazon. "Working around the diets is what pushes for some imagination and creativity in the kitchen," he said. "The main challenge I have is keeping the residents excited about the food."

Forest Hill has many well-traveled, cultured residents, including some from different parts of the world. "It's a very diverse group," he said. "Serving dishes that satisfy everyone consistently is our biggest challenge. Finding that balance is what keeps me on my toes."

Tuazon finds his work gratifying. "I get to make meals that sometimes remind residents of their past, of their childhoods or their travels," he said. "They are so very appreciative and positive about these experiences. And every now and then I get to introduce some of them to some new tastes."

Tuazon and his staff go all out on special occasions, not only with the food but with elaborate, decorative table settings.

"I am very pleased that all of our food is made from scratch," Leatham said. "Nate is also willing to donate salads to local community groups who feed the homeless."

"Working around the diets is what pushes for some imagination and creativity in the kitchen. The main challenge I have is keeping the residents excited about the food."

— Chef Nathaniel Tuazon

Armed with a culinary degree and a wealth of experience, Tuazon could easily find a high-profile restaurant gig anywhere.

"I do dream of my own place in the future, but what chef doesn't?" Tuazon said.

But he sees the value of his unique experience, and loves the bond he's created with residents.

"More than anything, I just love how food brings people together."

Great expectations

Valentine's Day is challenging for both restaurateurs and diners who seek a night of romance. It's

an evening with great expectations, one which sees armies of two take over dining rooms not set up for such an arrangement. And diners fear horrible service, overpriced food and a wilted rose on their way out the door.

I despise Valentine's Day because it's so insincere and contrived. So I dug deep for these two off-the-radar suggestions:

Baum & Blume in Carmel Valley lays out authentic charm on this day, with only five tables in the dining room. This year's five-course Mio Bellissimo Amore menu highlights the cuisine of the Italian Alps. Think cheeses, apples, fondue and hearty stewed meats to ward off the winter chill. Cost: \$68.50 per person. Seatings at 5:15 p.m., 7 p.m. and 8:30 p.m. Info: www.baumandblume.com.

Just in time for the big day, Salt Wood Kitchen & Oysterette in Marina has announced a major chef acquisition, nabbing well-traveled and talented Paul Corsentino from the Sur House at Ventana (formerly of Geoffrey Zakarian's The National in New York). A special tasting menu includes Champagne, raw oysters, artichokes, surf and turf and dessert (\$88). An optional supplement includes an oyster sampler platter and a bottle of Veuve Clicquot for \$148. Information: 883-5535.

Mike Hale is a freelance writer from Pacific Grove. Reach him at the grubhunter@att.net. Listen to his weekly radio show "Food Fodder" at noon Wednesdays on KRML, 102.1 FM.