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In Telluride, Colo., a positively Alpine feel

By Joanna Walters, November 23, 2012



• An early morning sunrise in downtown Telluride, Colo. (Brett Schreckengost/)

My nose and eyes tell me that I'm in the Alps.

I can smell lavender in the little vase on the white cloth-draped table, strong cheese from the top of my piping-hot onion soup and crepes suzette being cooked a-la-minute for the people next to me. I can see a sharp, snowy, sunlit peak from the outdoor bistro where I'm lunching and young wait staff in trendy flat caps bustling around with croques monsieur and madame for hungry skiers.

Details, Telluride, Colo.

But my ears tell me the truth.

"Have you tried the new restrooms? They're awesome. Five-star for sure," says a diner at the next table to her companion.

Then I hear "You're welcome," the waiter's automatic response when I thank him for bringing a fleecy blanket for my knees as the breeze coming down from the peak turns somewhat icy.

People don't generally say "awesome" in Courchevel, and wait staff from Kaprun to Cortina most certainly do not — at least not voluntarily — say "you're welcome" very often.

I'm in the United States!

Colorado, to be exact, in the picture-perfect resort of Telluride.

This is America, but not as we've known it. Telluride is undergoing a foodie transformation. The town at the bottom of the ski mountain has long been known for good grub, from top-notch steaks at the historic New Sheridan Hotel's chop house to sushi, Thai or fine-dining Italian.

But the new wave of gastronomic progress is now taking place up on the mountain. And it's quite a trip. In an audacious reach for a new crowd and a bit of buzz, Telluride is going gourmet on the hill.

Just last season, it launched an open-air French-style bistro

called Bon Vivant at the top of the busiest lift and started opening the mountain-top lunch spot Alpino Vino for evening multi-course feasts, with a chef from the Turin area of northern Italy.

The food and wine at both are exquisite, imaginative and sophisticated and have instantly elevated Telluride to the status of foodie-magnet on the slopes as well as off.

Tired of tepid junk between black-diamond drops? At Bon Vivant, I burned my tongue on the first mouthful of soup that had been freshly prepared and rushed to my table; then, after a necessary pause, I appreciated its rich flavors. It was followed by a slow-cooked lamb stew in Belgian ale, with duchess potatoes.

Now, don't think that I'm going all Euro-snob on you. The gastro-news in Telluride is as much about novelty, variety and quality as anything else. There's almost nothing worse for a foodie than bad French fare, so if the dishes had been all style and no substance, the experiment would have been a messy, skis-and-poles-everywhere-style wipe-out.

Besides, despite its name, Bon Vivant has distinct Colorado elements that lend the French flair some useful ruggedness. Lurking within the onion soup is local short rib; the lamb in the stew grew up in the Rockies; the vegetables and even the cheeses on some dishes are grown or made as locally as possible.

And the staff and customers are mainly good down-to-earth types who are quick to smile and share advice about where the powder is still lurking of an afternoon. Even if you speak French or Italian, European resorts aren't usually so genuinely friendly.

Romance on the mountain

Just at the bottom of the main lift, the other crucial addition to the mountain cuisine scene is Tomboy Tavern. Named after one of the old silver mines that put Telluride on the map at the turn of the 20th century, it's a solidly American-toned gastropub.

It features not just local microbrews on tap and exhilarating snowboarding videos running on a loop, but an overhauled menu that's gone distinctly upmarket, in a rustic eatery remodeled last season with recycled barn beams.

Where there used to be greasy pizza, there's now ahi tuna with pineapple and radish relishes and wasabi aioli, roast beef arugula salad with candied walnuts or designer sausages. And all at reasonable prices. So there's no attempt to make you think that you're not in Colorado.

Actually, that's not entirely true. Going to Alpino Vino for dinner, I got the distinct impression that they were pretending that we actually were in Italy. Some bits of that attempt worked, while some didn't.

What worked best was the attempt at creating a romantic atmosphere. At 11,966 feet, Alpino Vino is the highest restaurant in North America — and it's got to be one of the smallest — so the lucky diners who have snagged a reservation for one of the two evening seatings of no more than 26 people each are taken up the mountain in a tracked vehicle that chugs upward at an alarming angle.

The relief upon arriving at the top safely escalates quickly into a magical euphoria. I stepped out of the vehicle to be greeted by a waiter handing me a glass of chilled prosecco outside the tiny wooden chalet restaurant, surrounded by a wooden fence lit with dozens of candles.

With the crunch of fresh snow underfoot and nothing around except the silhouette of pines against a starry sky and the candles glowing in the crisp air, I experienced the fairy-tale feeling that so many places try to create (and certainly advertise), but that so few actually manage to make come true.

The log fire indoors, the delicately cooked bass with preserved lemon, the Italian wine pairings and the tiramisu cooked according to the recipe of the chef's 100-year-old grandmother (still alive and kicking back in their village near Turin) all worked

beautifully, too.

Where I drew the line was the silly Alpine peasant music and the even sillier Tyrolean outfits — let's just call them costumes — that the waiters were wearing, even down to little felt hats and colorful Alpine wool vests, with edelweiss-print neckties. I almost broke into a chorus of “It's a small, small world” in a Disney-doll voice. These details certainly didn't spoil an enchanted evening, but I think that the key sometimes, when going “theme,” is that less is more.

Telluride's aim in all this gastronomic innovation is to give the resort the kind of buzz you need when, famous and adorable as you are, you're a small town near the southern end of the Rockies in a box canyon on a road to nowhere, where the celebrity count is considerably lower than the ski bum count (except during the film festival) and the nearest interstate is many miles away.

Thank goodness. Give me innovation without the celebrities, the pretension or the overdevelopment. Niche is nice.

Exhilaration — or terror?

Food isn't the only area where Telluride is branching out. In the past three seasons, the resort has steadily opened up more and more expert and hike-to terrain, to the point where this is becoming its signature.

Telluride has always had a terrific mix of slopes, from scary chutes to scenic greens with blue highlights such as the long See Forever ridge that lives up to its name in clear weather. The view west from there goes all the way to the La Sal range in Utah, and the run ends down at Allred's, the restaurant at the gondola midpoint where it's traditional to catch a beer and watch the sunset alpenglow and then the moonrise over the tiny town nestled snugly in its canyon.

Telluride has never been short on beauty, history or excitement. But now it's going for pure exhilaration — or is that terror? It's a fine line sometimes.

It decided to snow sideways when I got to the top of the far-out Lift 12, the Prospect Express, at 11,880 feet, unclipped my skis and slung them over a shoulder.

Then it was head down, forging a way in my clompy boots up a snowy ridge, trying not to weave to the left or the right and get whipped off. I wasn't far below the 13,320 Palmyra Peak with its razor-blade ridges towering, spectacular but aloof, over the whole resort.

Frankly, I'm not expert enough (and the weather wasn't kind enough) even to try heading up the metal stairs installed a thousand feet farther up, leading to the heart-busting Gold Hill chutes. I was happy — and frightened — enough to be hiking up to the double-diamond selection in the ominously named Black Iron Bowl.

Telluride has opened up more than two dozen expert-level drops here in the past few seasons, as well as a handful of double-blacks that you basically get tough-guy medals for tackling at all. This area used to be far less accessible, with no extra lift and no stairs, so hard-core locals and bums are bummed now that their secret hike-to stashes are being invaded.

But it's hardly for the faint-hearted or the masses, so there are no lines, and the level of kudos helps a tucked-away resort such as Telluride punch above its weight.

But I digress, and a double-black awaits. With snow stinging my cheek but just enough visibility to allow me to see the stomach-hollowing drop, I stride past a short run appropriately called Confidence and clip my skis back on at the top of the benignly named La Rosa. I'm puffing and blowing from the hike up but thrilled to be up and away under my own steam with my head in the clouds.

Whoosh, I'm off, hurtling down the mountain with my heart in my mouth and my knees bent double. The altitude in Telluride takes it out of you, and I felt a bit as if I was skiing down Everest

— but with fewer crowds.

I want at least to hike up the Gold Hill Stairs to see what all the fuss is about, and when the weather improves the next day, I make a plan to head up there in the afternoon.

But here's where Telluride's innovations clash: Gastro lunches and hike-to skiing do *not* go together.

Sitting in Bon Vivant under bluebird skies at lunchtime, I find that the delicious duck confit and elk sausage casserole seems to have worked its way into my hollow legs and, upon standing, they appear to be twice as heavy as they were when I sat down. And I haven't even taken advantage of the champagne or the winter cocktails on offer.

I resolve to absorb some rays, freshen up in that five-star log-cabin bathroom behind the outdoor bistro that everyone's been raving about, then head down in leisurely fashion.

All it takes is a quick whiz back up the Polar Express lift and then, instead of slinging my skis over my shoulder for the double-blacks, I point them down the long, scenic Galloping Goose green that wends its way gently more than 2,000 feet downhill back to my ski-in, ski-out hotel.

Time for a session in the spa while plotting an attack on those crazy snow plunges — some other day.