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Travel

COLORADO

Telluride climbing some culinary heights, too

By Elizabeth Mehren | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT FEBRUARY 26, 2012



TELLURIDE RESORT

Alpino Vino, 11,966 feet high in Telluride, is the highest restaurant in North America - with prices and taste to match. Indoor-outdoor seating for 65 appeals to skiers who like to eat well.

TELLURIDE, Colo. - With their vast slopeside mess halls famous for tepid chili and slender patties masquerading as hamburgers, Americans, it is said, eat to ski.

By contrast, Europeans ski to eat. This means leisurely midafternoon meals marked by steaming cassoulet and platters of handmade pasta. It means exotic salads where tart, tangy dressings come not from stainless steel pumps but from a chef's imagination. It means soups that swim in your memory as you reluctantly make your way down the hill again: lush fresh mushroom, deep tomato bisque laced with Gorgonzola, gumbo heavy with crawfish, chicken, and chorizo.

It means eye-popping views of mountains so high they dance with heaven. It means cozy tables where adults can conduct actual conversations, not for one snow-filled moment to be confused with giant, cafeteria-style tables where at least one family of eight seems to be in perpetual meltdown.

Thus it was that my husband and I found ourselves lunching at North America's version of the top of the world. Hugging the hillside here at 11,966 feet, Alpino Vino is the highest-elevation restaurant in North America. It is also a key element in the Telluride Ski Resort's plan to convert American eater-skiers into European skier-eaters by sprinkling the sprawling mountain with small, high-end dining facilities. As of this season, three ski-in, ski-out restaurants offer bistro-like settings, distinct menus, and comparatively steep pricetags. A fourth spot, Gorrono Ranch, may be larger and more family-oriented, but how many other US ski barns serve barbecued alligator ribs?

Did I mention the waitstaff in dirndls and Tyrolean trousers? Piercing the sky on the horizon directly behind them is Mount Wilson, at 14,000 feet, the highest peak in the San Miguel range. Somehow, in the shadow of summits that rival the Alps, the servers manage not to look like refugees from "The Sound of Music." Instead, they appear almost indigenous.

And that was before we spied the wine list. My husband and I are old school, convinced that we need whatever muscles and brain cells we have left to stay upright on skis. We have a strict policy of no drinking while downhill. But a hostess in a periwinkle dirndl was describing the by-the-glass offerings. Once, just this once, we shared a nod that said, "Brunello di Montalcino, what a good idea."

While many Western ski resorts have grown progressively more over-the-top as they jockey for luxury-class clients, Telluride has straddled the line between funky and fancy. The glitzy mid-mountain “village” may have all the faux-Alpine allure (or lack thereof) of every other we’re-snazzier-than-you-are Western ski destination, but the 19th-century mining town at the mountain’s base has a charm so rugged you expect a grizzled silver prospector to burst from one of the numerous saloons, boasting of his latest bonanza.

Along with tough preservation policies enforced by a committed year-round population of just under 2,500, Telluride has kept its Old West flavor in part because the box-canyon community in southwestern Colorado is not easy to reach. A small airport that houses the country’s highest-altitude commercial landing strip provides limited direct service to Telluride. Most visitors fly in and out of Montrose, switching at the airport to a 90-minute shuttle-van ride to Telluride.

Skiers who do not head to the luxe hotels or rental homes at mid-mountain stay in Telluride’s small hotels, guest houses, or renovated miner’s cabins. The town is so compact and walkable that skiers can throw their skis over their shoulders and walk a short block or two to the gondola that carries them up the mountain. It’s an equally short walk to a fine independent bookstore-espresso bar, two well-stocked grocery stores, an outstanding town library, and a yoga-Pilates studio housed in an architectural treasure called the Nugget Building. Telluride boasts enough top-flight restaurants to make it possible to eat well at a different place every night in a one-week vacation. Again, all are reachable on foot, making a rental car superfluous.

One benefit of the transportation challenge is that compared with many other Western ski spots, Telluride is stunningly uncrowded. Except on fresh powder days, Telluride skiers joke that they get cranky when they have to share a lift.

But resort officials wanted a distinction beyond this balance of low-key and high-style. Targeting the foodie population that can also afford \$106 daily lift tickets, they decided to seduce skiers with fantastic food, right on the mountain, without crowds or chaos.

With tableside service and indoor-outdoor seating for about 65 people, Alpino Vino opened in 2009, setting the tone for intimate meals of a sort seldom seen on US mountaintops. Although the \$16 bowl is less than generous, the Gorgonzola-tomato bisque I ordered makes conventional tomato soup shrivel in shame. My husband chose a grilled vegetable panzanella, at \$18, stuffed with buffalo mozzarella, roasted red pepper, marinated artichoke, tomato tapenade, and basil pesto. Add the fabled glass of wine and coffee and we were soon looking north of \$75 for a ski lunch.

With the success of Alpino Vino, resort CEO Dave Riley decided last fall to go into high gear. First came a gussied-up menu at a miner's-style shack called Giuseppe's (elevation: 11,885 feet). This season, the 24-seat cafe took on a New Orleans theme, serving blackened chicken pasta, muffuletta and gumbo alongside its signature chili and black bean saute. We took our food outside to sit in Adirondack chairs staring squarely at Utah's LaSal Mountains, at least 75 miles away.

The next phase in the smaller-nicer dining establishment strategy came right around Halloween, when culinary services manager Cathy Schwindt got the idea to turn a storage closet at the top of the Polar Queen lift - about 10,000 feet - into the kitchen for a still-unbuilt French bistro. An uncharacteristically warm winter permitted a speeded-up construction schedule, and Bon Vivant opened on Jan. 1.

Waitstaff at the en plein air spot sport jaunty French caps, peacoats, and sturdy knit mufflers, delivering dishes like bubbling lamb stew and wild mushroom soup topped with puffed pastry to tables decorated with country French tableware and sprigs of fresh lavender. This was another splurge lunch - \$75 without alcohol - and though my husband savored the lobster gnocchi that arrived in a Le Creuset dish, all I had was a frisee salad with some chevre thrown in. Still, the French bread was warm and crunchy and beneath the blazing heat lamps and the 39-foot umbrella that wards off the elements, we had no complaints. Schwindt said an enclosed restaurant should follow by next winter.

We, too, will likely follow next winter, returning not just for the mountains, but also for the meals.

If you go...**Where to stay**

New Sheridan Hotel 231 West Colorado Ave. 800-200-1891

www.newsheridan.com With just 26 rooms (all recently renovated), the hotel also boasts a glittering chophouse dining room. Winter rates \$179-\$249.

Where to eat

221 South Oak 221 South Oak St. 970-728-9507 221southoak.com Sublime dinners in a refurbished home near the base of the ski gondola. Entrees \$27- \$45.

La Cocina de Luz 123 East Colorado Ave. 970-728-9355

www.lacocinatelluride.com Mexican cuisine 9-9 seven days a week. Entrees \$11- \$19.

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