

FSR

Ideas and Insights for Full-Service Restaurants

Chef Secrets for Lamb Season

Innovations of Imaginative Restaurants

Crafting the Future: Beers on Tap Pull Margins

Technology Turns Tables

MORGAN'S
in the desert
Jimmy Schmidt

AL FRESCO DINING'S ALLURE

At Morgan's in the Desert, executive chef Jimmy Schmidt elevates fine dining outdoors.



At Morgan's in the Desert, executive chef Jimmy Schmidt says the food presentation benefits from natural lighting in outdoor settings.

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Al Fresco Dining's *allure*

BY CONNIE GENTRY

AS EXECUTIVE CHEF AT MORGAN'S IN THE DESERT, JIMMY SCHMIDT BRINGS HIS JAMES BEARD-AWARD WINNING TALENTS FROM HIS RATTLESNAKE CLUB RESTAURANTS IN DENVER AND DETROIT TO CALIFORNIA'S COACHELLA VALLEY. DESCRIBING DESERT DINING, HE SAYS: "THE COLORS OF THE FOOD ARE BETTER IN THE NATURAL SETTING; AND WHEN THE SUN IS SETTING YOU HAVE THIS BEAUTIFUL SOFT LIGHT—THE WHOLE ENVIRONMENT GLOWS."

RAMON C. PURCELL/ICPHOTO.COM

Dining at its finest is found in dramatic outdoor settings that simply cannot be replicated within the confines of a walled and roofed structure. Even the most opulent interior design fails to achieve the splendor of a desert sunset, and no amount of indoor originality can compare to the liberating rooftop view of a cityscape or the simple pleasures of dining alongside a gently lapping river.

"People relax more when dining outside—there's a freedom that even the most spacious dining rooms can't achieve," says Jimmy Schmidt, executive chef of Morgan's in the Desert, the exclusive restaurant in California's legendary La Quinta Resort.

He also observes that people linger longer in outdoor settings "to enjoy the environment," as if dining is the entertainment of the evening rather than a prelude to the next event.

Whether diners actually eat heartier in an outdoor venue he can't say, but "one thing is for sure," he quips, "they drink heartier. Beverage sales are definitely higher on the patio than inside our restaurant."

There is no denying the allure of alfresco dining—for diners as well as for restaurateurs. But outdoor dining also brings unique challenges, most often related to unpredictable weather, staffing decisions, and reservations management.

At Morgan's, the challenge is the desert climate: "Morgan's is a dinner-only restaurant and the temperature drops significantly at night," says Schmidt. "Especially since the busiest season and the nicest time to dine outside is in the winter, spring, and fall. Keeping temperature in the food is critical—so that's the biggest challenge."

THE OUTDOOR EXPERIENCE

Fortunately, Schmidt is as much food scientist as culinary artist, so he selects china that can stand up to higher temperatures. "If you put hot food on a cold plate, the plate is heavier and draws all the heat out of the food—so china must have a thermal value to maintain heat. Also, you have to be aware of all this stored thermal energy in the plate that's going to continue to cook the food."

But he cautions that a plate doesn't have to be incredibly hot to continue cooking—and many foods are better served rare or cooked to a medium temperature. His solution: Cook fish and meats "just a hair under" the desired temperature so that when the diner gets the plate the food is perfectly cooked—including any heat absorbed from stored energy in the plate.

"You have this thermal [conundrum] going on, especially in outdoor dining," he continues. "You want the food to arrive hot and be perfectly cooked—but it may actually finish cooking right there in front of the guest."

Morgan's serves food until 11:00 P.M., so by that hour the desert has cooled considerably and diners appreciate the fire pits and heaters located within the terrace. "Solar heat builds up in the stone patios during the day and radiates warmth into the evening," Schmidt adds. "It's not like being by a body of water where the cool winds come in and make it even [colder] when temperatures drop at night."

Weathering Inclement Conditions

Climate control is an issue for every outdoor dining venue—and even more so in less temperate regions like the Pacific Northwest or Great Lakes, where dining al fresco is typically an unexpected luxury.

"Outdoor dining creates unique opportunities and great curb appeal," says Scott Ponchetti, director of operations for Hard Rock Café's Southwest region, which includes eight locations (all but one with an outdoor venue). Although his territory encompasses sun-drenched locations in Hawaii and southern California, one of the most impressive outdoor settings is in Seattle.

"The Seattle Hard Rock Café has an amazing rooftop space in a market that doesn't have many outdoor-dining venues because of its reputation for inclement weather," says Ponchetti. "Our rooftop provides a unique experience with beautiful views of Pike Place Market and the Puget Sound. When the lights are on at night and the music is playing, even the rooftop location has curb appeal."

Open from mid-March to November, Ponchetti says revenues on the rooftop are primarily from alcohol but a full menu is available. "Most people are surprised that there is almost no rain in Seattle during the summer months," he says. "We set up a grill on the rooftop and prepare seafood or hamburgers, almost like a clambake on the beach; and we've even hosted weddings on the roof."

In his estimation the biggest challenges are service-related: "Outdoor spaces are often farther from the kitchen so you need your better people serving and working those settings." And in markets where it's difficult to predict the weather, Ponchetti says the biggest thing is staffing decisions—how many servers to bring in when the weather is questionable.

Chicago is another city where—when the weather cooperates—al fresco dining is all the rage, especially when augmented by a central location on the city's river corridor. The Bridge House Tavern claimed the waterfront catbird seat and, since opening in May 2011, has been voted



TOP PHOTOS: DANIEL DUNCAN OF SHOOT TO KILL STUDIOS.



CROWDS FLOCK TO RESTAURANTS WITH PREMIUM LOCATIONS IN URBAN MARKETS. BRIDGE HOUSE TAVERN (TOP PHOTOS) CLAIMS THE CATBIRD SEAT ON CHICAGO'S RIVER CORRIDOR. FROM 5:00 P.M. FRIDAY THROUGH SUNDAY, BRIDGE HOUSE TAVERN EXPANDS ITS OUTDOOR SETTING WITH A SECOND-STORY LOUNGE—COURTESY OF AN ARRANGEMENT WITH THE AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION, A FLAGSHIP TENANT IN THE SPACE ABOVE THE RESTAURANT. AND HARD ROCK CAFÉ EMBRACES THE SEATTLE SKYLINE—COMPLETE WITH RESPLENDENT VIEWS OF THE PUGET SOUND AND HISTORIC PIKE PLACE MARKET.

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