


**MORGAN'S IN THE
 DESERT AT LA QUINTA
 RESORT & CLUB**

LOCATION: 49-499 Eisenhower Drive, La Quinta.

RESERVATIONS:
 (760) 564-4927.

HOURS: Lunch during the season Thursday to Sunday 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. Dinner daily 5:30 p.m. to 10 p.m.

WHAT IT COSTS: Soup, starters and salads, \$6 to \$18; Pizzas, \$15 to \$18; Sandwiches, \$14 to \$17; Entrees, \$17 to \$26; Cheese Plates and Desserts, \$4 to \$18.

All major credit cards accepted. Bar dining available including "Bar Bites." Piano music with Paul Douglas Wednesday to Saturday 7 p.m. to 11 p.m. Wine dinners every other Friday during the season.

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DESERT HOT SPOTS

Sample the Coachella Valley's fine dining options *By David Cohen • Photography by Trina Gonzalez*

Morgan's is the flagship restaurant at the La Quinta Resort. The hacienda-style restaurant reflects its Spanish heritage with Spanish colonial style furnishings, arched entryways, high open beamed ceilings, wrought iron, soft lighting and a fireplace framed by wine racks on either side. A warm, graciously appointed lounge with a piano bar leads into the main dining room. Patio dining is available year round, and there's also a private dining room for special events.

The kitchen is overseen by Executive Chef Jimmy Schmidt of Rattlesnake Club fame. The honors he's attained in his career are

too numerous to mention them all, but some of the highlights include a James Beard award for "Best Chef of the Southwest" and listing in *Gourmet* magazine's "America's Best Restaurants." Schmidt was the founder of the Chef's Collaborative in 1991, a nonprofit organization devoted to fostering a sustainable food system, as well as being a founding board member of Share Our Strength in Denver, which is a nationwide organization devoted to ensuring that no child in America grows up hungry.

He has authored or co-authored a number of cookbooks, including *Cooking For All Seasons* and *Heart Healthy Cooking For All Seasons*. He's also provided catering services for the "24 Hours of Le Mans" Auto Race since 1999.

DINING PLEASURES from Morgan's: Previous page: Pan roasted Maple Leaf breast of duck and foie, caramelized two apple salad. This page: Seared Maine diver sea scallops with gingered pumpkin risotto. Bottom right: Executive Chef Jimmy Schmidt.



At Morgan's, the spotlight is on contemporary American cuisine, making use of open grilling, braising, slow roasting and curing to provide deeply flavorful, rustic, health-conscious cuisine for the customers. Prix Fixe multi-course meals are available, and if you're adventurous, I'd recommend putting yourself in the chef's hands. Just tell him how many courses you'd like, anything you don't eat, and then settle back, as we did, and enjoy some of the finest cuisine in Southern California.

A word about the wine list. Sommelier Francois Cinq-Mars has put together a broad and deep array of bottlings focusing mainly on California, Washington and Oregon. He will match wines for you with each course to provide the optimal pairings. Morgan's also offers 28 different wines by the glass.

We began with two pristine Pacific oysters on the shell, bathed in an apple cider granita and garnished with a chive froth. The roasted baby beet salad was lovely, served with frisee and chevre goat cheese and tossed with a black walnut and sherry vinaigrette. The ahi tuna tartare was beautifully rendered—sushi grade light pink cubes of ahi bathed in the juices of tangerines grown on the premises and garnished with sweet Maui onions, Nicoise olives and an endive salad. One of Schmidt's signature appetizers is seared salt and pepper crusted Sonoma County foie gras, a generous square of perfectly seared foie, surrounded by slices of caramelized Bosc pear and sauteed fresh porcini mushrooms—a cacophony of exploding flavors on the palate that was absolutely divine.

From the seafood section came seared Maine diver sea scallops and coriander crusted Alaskan black cod. The succulent melt-in-your-mouth scallops were served on a bed of gingered pumpkin risotto. The pumpkin was harvested from Morgan's own garden. The black cod was one of the absolute best fish dishes I've ever encountered. The flesh of the fish was sweet and slightly smoky and melt-in-your-mouth tender, accompanied by a melange of sweet corn, Maui onions, fingerling potatoes and applewood smoked Nueske bacon—a flat out tri-

umph of creativity and taste.

For you meat eaters, you'll feel like you've just been transported to carnivore heaven. The porcini crusted Angus fillet is cold dry aged for 60 days and the meat is 1970 prime quality (a higher grade of beef than the prime designation now signifies). Served in a porcini stock/red wine reduction along with grilled porcini and a Comte potato gratin, this fillet has more of a Kansas City strip mouth feel to it with a firmness that belies the luscious meatiness within. Cut it into small pieces to savor the flavor. Also outstanding was the rack of pistachio crusted Colorado lamb—two double chops, perfectly done, accompanied by a roasted sweet pepper, cranberry and butter bean ragout. Although there was little fat in evidence, there was no shortage of succulence present.

Desserts abound, all prepared on the premises, and include espresso creme brulee with Kahlua whipped cream and powdered cocoa; a Popsicle cream parfait with ginger, chocolate and homemade toffee crunch and caramel popcorn; pumpkin bread pudding with caramel sauce and homemade vanilla ice cream; and mascarpone cheesecake with caramelized apples,

an oatmeal crumb topping and caramel ice cream. Personally, I'd opt for the artisan cheese plate with a choice of three to four types such as Cowgirl Double Cream, Purple Haze goat cheese, Morbier and Grassland Bleu, accompanied by mixed toasted nuts drizzled with honey and warm black walnut toast. Add a glass of port and raise it to a memorable culinary experience.

Here are a few other choice dining spots in the desert:

PALM SPRINGS

Copley's on Palm Canyon 621 North Palm Canyon Drive, (760) 327-9555. Open for dinner January to July. Chef Andrew Copley's repertoire includes butternut squash ravioli and braised duck with pumpkin puree; rack of lamb with oven basil potatoes, grilled eggplant and asparagus; and pan roasted Australian barramundi fish accompanied by blue crab wrapped potato and Manila clam vegetable chowder. Dinner entrees \$27-\$37.

Spencer's 701 West Baristo Road (at Tahquitz Drive) (760) 327-3446. Open for breakfast, lunch, dinner and Sunday brunch. Check out Chef Eric Wadlund's signature creations: braised beef "Wellington" sandwiches; Moroccan spiced

