

Restaurant Review for Vail Valley Magazine, Winter 2009

Vail Cascade Welcomes Innovative New Chef
by Joey Porcelli

From early childhood training at his Ohio family's Baskin Robbins ice cream shop to his new position as Executive Chef of the Vail Cascade Hotel, Chef Adam Votaw's culinary journey reads like a travelogue. His experience at the helm of some of the country's finest restaurants makes him the perfect choice to master creative cooking at the newly renovated, high-end Atwater on Gore Creek and the adjoining casual gastro-pub, The Tavern.

Votaw, who describes himself as a visionary, seems to have a knack for being in the right place at the right time when it comes to furthering his gastronomic career.

After receiving a liberal arts degree from Wittenberg College in Springfield Ohio, Votaw decided to attend the Culinary Institute of America in New York. "I knew then that cooking was what I wanted to do." After his graduation in 1984, Votaw realized he could handle basic techniques, but says, "I wanted to learn how to think like a cook." So, he went to Europe to apprentice with Albert and Michel Roux at Le Gavroche, one of London's most prestigious restaurants. Under the tutelage of the Roux brothers, Votaw honed his skills and gained experience in classic French cooking including the art of pastry making.

At Le Gavroche, Votaw immersed himself in the cooking process. In order to plan and organize meals on a daily basis, he became selective at local London food markets and learned to hand pick produce, meat, fish, and fowl." Votaw established a relationship with purveyors and ordered directly from them. Sometimes, deliveries posed a challenge. "When the escargot came in live, I had to figure out how to cook them. If we needed venison for the restaurant, we ordered it and a whole deer showed up, so we had to instantly fabricate it."

After three years in London, Votaw moved back to the United States and joined a thriving culinary scene in Washington D.C. He soon became Executive Pastry Chef at Le Chardon d'Or at the Morrison House in Old Town Alexandria, Virginia. Next stop, Palm Beach Florida where he jumped back into the hot line as Executive Chef at Café L'Europe. But, Votaw's love of making sweets kept resurfacing and he soon found himself running the pastry shop at a brand new luxury Four Seasons hotel, the Ocean Grand. Here, he met Executive Chef Robin Haas and the two collaborated on setting up a high-end bakeshop. Votaw's imagination took over as he created whole wheat croissants, fines herbs puff pastry, homemade yogurt, and chocolate, all from scratch. For his efforts, *Food Arts* magazine bestowed him the honor of "Top Pastry Chef."

In 1991, Votaw renewed his association with Albert Roux at The Point, an exclusive eleven-room inn in upstate New York where he excelled. But, when opportunity knocked

again, he found himself back in Florida with a position as Executive Sous Chef at the Boca Raton Resort & Club and later in a corporate role in West Palm Beach where he supervised 200 employees. Votaw's next move was to join China Grill where he once again worked with Robin Haas to create an original menu concept, Nuevo Asian fare.

Votaw also held culinary positions at La Playa Beach & Golf Resort & Spa in Naples, Fla., Chispa Restaurant Corporation in Miami, and the Little Palm Island resort in the Florida Keys. Zagat ranked the Little Palm dining room third in the United States. Votaw continued his Florida career at Miami's China Grill and the Riviera Resort & Spa in Palm Springs where he created a new culinary concept at Circa 59 with his contemporary twist on the traditional steakhouse. "I had this grass roots down and dirty experience with Floridian cuisine. It helped me work back to my roots."

Today, Votaw specializes in contemporary American cuisine. Getting down to basics at Atwater is one of his priorities. The restaurant makes artisanal products such as dough for pasta and flatbread, bratwurst, cured pork belly, and lox in-house. Votaw also continues to promote a hands-on, fresh from the fields, style of cooking. Guided by the principles of sustainability, he says, "We're deep into the trenches with the farm to table concept."

When available, Chef Votaw selects simple foods and organic products from regional Colorado farms such as Meadow Mountains and Haystack. Atwater's menu includes an array of Colorado cheese courses including a crème de la chevre with "richness beyond comparison" and the hot chocolate cheddar, a melding of mill cheddar with veins of smoky Chipotle and cocoa. Votaw also cooks Colorado red trout and striped bass, Meadow Mountains rack of lamb, and Colorado grass fed bone-in rib eye steak as part of his local repertoire.

For his salads, Votaw picks raw vegetables such as wild arugula and organic butter lettuce and then pairs local heirloom tomatoes with housemade Mozzarella cheese. He also makes his own ricotta for the Atwater house salad. In the winter months, organic root vegetables including turnips, petite carrots, and roasted potatoes appear as sides. For the Caesar salad, Votaw pours an egg less dressing over hearts of romaine and tops it with toasted Focaccia crumbs, shaved Reggiano, and white anchovies.

Votaw plans to revamp the Atwater menu seasonally. Because he is mindful of giving loyal customers diverse dining options, he wants to branch out by adding more fish and a selection of eclectic appetizers and desserts to the menu. One of his most sought after appetizers, the tuna martini, detours in a surprising way from the ordinary ahi starter. For this tasty dish, Votaw spices rare tuna with Moroccan saffron and adds pistachios and a golden raisin risotto. "On a very cold day, it will warm you up. The first course gets your palate going and then this particular blend of spices, protein, and the creaminess of the risotto pulls you through."

Entrée selections continue to change as Votaw modifies and re-concepts his menu. Traditional fish entrees include a cedar planked salmon with lemon barley salad and

tomato crudo, pan seared scallops with crispy spinach and saffron risotto, ruby red trout with watermelon pico de gallo and a creamy Maine lobster risotto with shiitake mushrooms, sweet corn, and spring greens. Simply prepared grilled dishes such as filet of beef, New York strip, rack of lamb and Colorado dry aged buffalo rib eye will remain on the menu year round.

One of Votaw's planned innovations for Atwater is the addition of comfort food because, as he says, "Smart restaurateurs are doing it." He wants to substitute less expensive cuts of meat so "We can go from the veal chop to the pork chop." Half portions and special two and three course menus at Atwater are also available to help the budget minded, but Votaw vows not to sacrifice quality for economy.

Although Atwater, with its white tablecloths, full service dinner menu, and elegant decor looks like an upscale dining room, Chef Votaw insists that his customers feel comfortable in their surroundings. They are just as welcome in jeans or after skiwear as more formal attire. He says, "Here, you're just going to eat good food and drink good wine."

Atwater's wine list lives up to Votaw's description with an international mix including Australian Shiraz, French Grenache, Italian Nebbiolo and California Meritage. The cocktail menu is equally intriguing with offerings of glug wine, coconut eggnog, and an organic pear margarita. After a cocktail, diners know they are in for a treat when they peruse the menu. Regulars even get to have their say as to what's on it. Votaw explains, "When I first arrived in Colorado, I asked the hotel's regular customers what dishes they wanted to keep from the old menu. Everyone asked me if I knew how to make pheasant soup, so I brought it back and got their approval."

Votaw deserves accolades for every bowl of this rich chowder. Made with sweet corn, green onion, wild rice, cream, and chunks of tender smoked pheasant, the soup is best eaten with bites of crusty poppy seed bread and a glass of Pinot Noir. Might be wise to follow it with a great salad and a plate of steak and truffle pomme frites.

Votaw prides himself on creating his own recipes for every course, but dessert might be his crowning glory. While working as chef at Little Palm Island, he became famous for a macadamia nut encrusted key lime pie he baked daily for the resort's lucky guests. Fortunately for Vail Cascade guests, he decided to adapt that popular dessert. The newest version is a macadamia nut encrusted white chocolate and coconut cheesecake drizzled with mango and raspberry coulis with a side of lemon gelato, the same creamy kind Votaw says "Grandma used to make with a hand crank." Other desserts include a cinnamon pecan monkey bread with sour cherry and toffee sauce drenched in vanilla crème Anglaise, and a chocolate lava cake with caramelized bananas and brandy sauce.

In December 2008, Atwater underwent a complete renovation. The restaurant expanded its seating to 229 and added a 1,380 square foot addition adjacent to the patio with the addition of The Tavern, where small plates, drinks, and appetizers are served in more casual surroundings. With windows facing mountainside, the restaurant's newly configured space gives it an outdoorsy feel.

Johnson David Interiors of Englewood, Colorado designed the new look to take advantage of the establishment's proximity to Gore Creek. Atwater and The Tavern both enjoy views of the woods and water below. Designers, inspired by the natural beauty, replicated it inside Atwater on the restaurant's back wall. A huge mural mimics flowing Gore Creek and cut lodge pole pines protrude out of the painting as if forming the water's banks. Inside the dining room, sculptures made of white twigs glisten under artistic forged iron light fixtures. Atwater's color scheme includes mountain hues, from Aspen gold to red willow, to earthy brown with stunning accents of sky blue. A two-way modern steel clad fireplace gives the dining area a warm glow.

Working his magic in this dynamic setting, Chef Votaw, after years of fine-tuning his culinary skills, has found his niche at the Vail Cascade. In 2006, *Restaurant Institutions*, named him the year's "rising star chef." Diners who frequent Atwater and The Tavern are grateful that his star now shines over Gore Creek and the Vail Valley,

Atwater on Gore Creek is located at 1300 Westhaven Drive in Vail, Colorado at the base of Vail Mountain. For dinner reservations at Atwater on Gore Creek call (970) 479-7014.

The restaurant is open for Breakfast: Monday - Sunday: 7:00am - 11:00am

Lunch: Monday - Sunday: 11:00am - 5:00pm

Dinner: Monday - Sunday: 5:00pm - 10:00pm.