

chefs **kitchen**



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COOKIN' AWAY IN MARGARITA-VILLE

BY JANE ALBRITTON

Chef Eric Viedt spins his culinary imagination like one of those Western riders spins a lariat. He sits easy in his saddle. Slowly, he begins to swing the lasso, wider and wider, until the loop moves freely up from his horse's hooves to way above his hat. And just when you think that rope can't reach any farther, he taps his pony and they ride.

In 1997 Eric Viedt traveled west from a small town near Schenectady, New York, looking for adventure and construction work.

"I came out here to Colorado Springs when I was 21, with \$1,600 in my pocket," Viedt said. "My buddy Michael, who had gone to culinary school, asked me if I wanted to get some training by working the line at the Hatch Cover, where he was chef. I said sure."

Viedt's experience preparing food on the restaurant's hot line amounted to a kind of boot camp where he learned the fundamentals of cooking in a fast-paced restaurant setting. The work energized him. Cooking professionally just seemed like a natural extension of how he was raised.

"I grew up on an ag farm," he said. "We had about 100 acres. Things grow so wonderfully in Upstate New York—strawberries, corn, tomatoes—because there is so much moisture in the air."

Viedt had been cooking at the Hatch Cover for a year and a half when he responded to an ad for the head chef's job in the kitchen of the Margarita at Pine Creek.

"I was 23," he said. "But the owner Pati and I just clicked. Between the fundamentals I had learned from my buddy, Pati's taste buds and my growing collection of cookbooks, we were on our way. My title here is chef because that's my position, but what I do is cook."

And now after nine years of cooking and bringing new life to the patio and all the rest of the open space around the Margarita, Viedt is part owner of the establishment. His easy manner and zest for cooking made him a good match for a restaurant with deep roots in the community.

In 1969, Pati and Ken Davidson opened a little shop featuring Mexican imports, art and Pati's soups on Colorado Springs' east side. When soups trumped imports in the hearts of their customers, they enlisted the help of architect Al Feinstein and built a restaurant near a stand of Ponderosa pines at the confluence of Pine and Monument Creeks.

"Pati and Kenny were such artists," Viedt said. "You can see that in the way they applied the stucco and how they designed the interior—full of nooks and crannies. They originally had an amphitheater in back, and I hope we can bring that back."

Ken Davidson died in 1993, but the restaurant and grounds kept evolving under Pati's creative direction until Viedt appeared and fell in love with the place, inside and out.

"We created a big patio in '02 and '03," Viedt said. "I've always been good with my hands, and so after I built the bar downstairs, I built the pergola and enlarged the patio. In the summer we do music and movies, and on Saturdays this becomes a kind of mini-festival, now that we've got the Colorado Farm and Art Market (CFAM) right on the grounds. I can grab fresh produce for the next week; people coming to the market can have a drink and listen to live music or grab a cup of coffee fresh-roasted via sun/mirror power. Artists show their pottery, silk screening and jewelry, and everyone feels welcome to come into the restaurant for something to eat."

The restaurant and the grounds around it, including the herb garden off the subterranean lounge, operate like an organic whole, while the beating heart of the enterprise—the kitchen—keeps the core humming with invention and creativity. Shaped by what is fresh and available, the cuisine might be described as robustly American with a serrated Southwestern edge.

"It's not easy to identify the style or rhyme or reason for what we do," Viedt said. "People come because the menu is always changing and the food is always tasty."

And, he might add, daring. His "48-Hour 'Red' Braised Sous Vide Pork Belly with Apples, White Cheddar & Mustard" won the People's Choice Award at the 2008 Chefs' Gala, held at the Broadmoor. His parsnip cake (think carrot cake with a twist) won in its category two years before. To match the meals that materialize in his mind, Viedt draws his ingredients from local markets and distant ones as well.

"We get our cheese from Canon City Cheese, Longmont's Haystack Mountain and Windsor Dairy. We get sheep's milk cheese from Steamboat," he said. "We cure our own duck breast and smoke our own salmon. We get our fish direct-shipped from Honolulu: Opa, Monchong, Baramundi and Kona Kampachi. I am interested in the Kampachi because it's sustainably raised off the Big Island."

Viedt estimates that he uses more than 20 local purveyors and is always looking to up that number. And what is not available locally will certainly arrive from someplace interesting: France, for example.

"We get our wine from The Wine Seller in Monument," Viedt said. "The owner, Dirk Stamp, buys from Kathleen and Philip Sevier in Denver, who specialize in importing French wines from small, family-owned vineyards. Some of the winemakers have come here to visit in order to see how their wine worked with American food."

Naturally, the next step was for Margarita's chefs to visit the wine on its home turf. In 2006 Viedt and pastry/lunch chef Cathy Werle took off for Provence, France, to cook for the wine makers. They came home with a new appreciation for what the small-scale, exacting process of vinification can mean to the palate.

"We cooked at three different vineyards," Werle said. "The wine-makers were interested in our take on what would taste good with

Left: Chef Eric Viedt heats up Colorado Springs.
Photo by Carole Topalian

their wine. Their kind of wine production is slow and careful. It's a perfect match for the kind of cooking we do."

Given the turn of the seasons, the availability of ingredients and Chef Viedt's spinning imagination, it is hard to predict what might be on the wide-ranging dinner menu on any given week. However, in fall and early winter, one might find duck confit-white bean taco, honeyed beet relish and goat cheese-scallion crumbles, or a mustard-glazed grilled pork chop with bulgur wheat, seasonal salsa and caramelized Walla Walla onion-gaujillo chile jus.

"We're continuing our family-style Sunday Suppers the first Sunday of each month," he said. "November 9 is Mexican; December 7 is cold-weather comfort food, like chicken and dumplings and mashed potatoes."

The future looks good for the Margarita and her chef. Viedt is a cook on a mission: to create meals that surprise and delight visitors, to share the joys of real food with a broader audience, and to have a wonderful time doing it all.

The Margarita at Pine Creek

7350 Pine Creek Rd., Colorado Springs

719-598-8667

Call for hours, reservations and directions.

coloradoeats.com/margarita/home.html

SWEET POTATO TAMALES WITH PULLED PORK, CHILI SPICED APPLES, AND SAVORY HONEY-SCALLION BUTTER

Chefs Cathy Werle and Eric Viedt

Sweet Potato Tamales

- 10 ounces (1¼ cups) lard or vegetable shortening, at room temperature
- 2 teaspoons salt or to taste
- 1 ½ teaspoons baking powder
- 2 pounds fresh masa or 3 ½ cups dried masa mixed with 2 ¼ cups hot water
- 3 medium sweet potatoes, baked, cooled and pureed
- Honey, to taste
- 1 pack dried corn husks, soaked in warm water until pliable

Pulled Pork

- 1 medium onion, sliced
- 3 garlic cloves
- 1 pork butt roast, about 5 pounds
- Salt and pepper

Chili Spiced Apples

- 2 tablespoons butter
- 3-4 apples of your choice, unpeeled and chopped (about 2 ½ cups)
- 1 teaspoon Hatch red chili powder
- 1 teaspoon brown sugar

Savory Scallion-Honey Butter

- 1 stick salted butter, at room temperature
- 2-4 scallions, finely sliced
- 1 tablespoon honey
- ¼ teaspoon Hatch chili powder

Tamales: With an electric mixer beat the lard with the salt and baking powder until light in texture, about 1 minute. Slowly add the masa and potato puree until fully incorporated. Taste for salt and sweetness. Add honey, as desired for taste. Continue beating another 2 minutes, or until a dollop of batter will float in a cup of cold water. Masa should now be the texture of a soft but not runny cake batter.

Spoon about ¼ cup filling into the center of each softened husk. Fold in both sides and fold bottoms up, or tie each end with strips of excess husks.

Arrange tamales in a steam basket. Steam over medium heat for 1½ hours, making sure the water does not evaporate.

Pulled Pork: Heat oven to 375°. In a large Dutch oven or ovenproof dish layer onion and garlic on bottom; rest pork on top. Season with salt and freshly ground black pepper; add 1 inch of water. Cover with foil and roast for 2½ hours, or until pork is tender.

When cool, shred pork with your hands or two forks. Moisten with leftover juices from pot; season to taste.

Chili Spiced Apples: In a large skillet over medium-high heat, melt butter. When just starting to brown add diced apples; caramelize for 30 seconds. Stir in chili powder and sugar. Let cook until softened but apples still hold their shape. Taste for seasoning.

Savory Scallion-Honey Butter: Combine ingredients in bowl until incorporated and smooth. Shape into logs and wrap in plastic or wax paper. To use, remove wrap and cut into rounds.

To Assemble: Take freshly steamed tamales and either remove from husk if folded, or slit and present opened, if tied. Top with pork, apples, and garnish with savory butter. Makes about 36 tamales.

PARSNIP CAKE WITH BAVAROISE AND GINGER SYRUP

Chefs Cathy Werle and Eric Viedt

Parsnip Cake

2 sticks (1 cup) salted butter
1 cup canola oil
2 cups granulated sugar
2 cups brown sugar
4 cups flour
2 teaspoons baking powder
2 teaspoons baking soda
2 tablespoons ground ginger
8 eggs
6 cups grated parsnips

Preheat oven to 350°F

In a large mixing bowl cream butter, oil, and both sugars until white and fluffy. In a separate bowl combine flour, baking powder and soda, and ground ginger. Add flour mixture, alternating with eggs, to butter-sugar in mixing bowl until evenly mixed. Fold in grated parsnips thoroughly without over-mixing.

Spread into a greased 9x13 rectangle baking dish or into 2 greased round 9-inch cake pans. Bake until the top is springy and the edges slightly pull away from pan, about 40 minutes. Let cool in the pan.

Ricotta Bavaroise

1 cup heavy cream, divided
2 teaspoons powdered gelatin
¼-1/3 cup honey
Zest of 1 lemon
1 sprig of thyme
10 ounces Ricotta cheese (New-York style, for smoothness)
2 egg whites

In a saucepan warm 1/2 cup of the cream. Add gelatin and let sit 5 minutes. Stir in honey, lemon, and thyme. Remove from heat and let cool slightly.

In a food processor combine ricotta cheese and gelatin mixture. Let cool to room temperature. Beat the egg whites until stiff; set aside. Whip the remaining ½ cup cream until it holds a peak and gently fold both whites and cream into the cooled gelatin mixture. Chill until set.

Candied Ginger Syrup

1 cup sugar
¼ cup candied ginger or 2 tablespoons minced fresh ginger

Combine sugar and ginger in small saucepan with 1 cup water. Simmer gently until reduced and syrupy.

To Assemble: When cake has cooled frost the top with Bavaroise (or if using 2 round pans, frost both layers). Cut into serving pieces and drizzle with syrup. Garnish each serving with toasted walnuts, lemon zest and fresh thyme, if desired.

Makes 12 servings