

chef's kitchen



A world of experience lands lightly at Arugula

BY KAREN MITCHELL

Think of it as fine dining, Northern Italian style, but with a twist. At Boulder's Arugula Bar e Ristorante, the namesake small leafy green with the tangy taste speaks to the chef's passion for light, healthy cuisine prepared to satisfy the most discriminating palate.

Arugula's 37-year-old chef/proprietor, Alec Schuler, is a globetrotter whose culinary history comes in for a landing at his 70-seat restaurant. There, his menu reflects the seasonal and the sublime—local organics, sustainable seafood and poultry, pork, beef and lamb—all with a light touch.

"We don't even have a fryer; 70 to 80 percent of our recipes are vegan-based, including sauces and lentils, with ingredients such as cheese and butter added later," Alec says. "As we finalize a sauce we



throw in a little pat of butter, but it doesn't need to be half a stick. And if we have a vegan customer, we can please them."

In certain markets, including Boulder, San Francisco and other more progressive areas, his style of cooking is becoming a trend.

Opposite: Alec Schuler. Above: Kitchen war—comparing burn scars. From left to right: Alec Schuler, Ben Mitchell, Colin Hemens. Photos by Kirsten Boyer, kirstenboyerphotography.blogspot.com

"These are open-minded places in that people recognize they can have a great dining experience without extra fat," he says. "Others just want all the butter because they paid \$30 for a dish and think that makes it perfect."

A specials list focusing on seasonal local availability enhances Alec's regular menu. "I do small quantities for specials, only 10 to 15 portions of each per day. It's always fresh and we always sell out. That's the key."

Alec grew up on Long Island, the son of Swiss-born Paul Schuler and Christine, his English mother. "My European parents always wanted to eat healthier; less fat and fewer meats," Alec says. "My love of Italian food came from them; we frequently ate at fine-dining Italian restaurants in New York, where the food is cooked by fourth-generation Italians—the real thing." Alec's parents now live in Boulder and are his partners in Arugula.

After graduating in 1995 from the University of Colorado, Boulder, where he was on the CU ski team and a bike racer, Alec returned East and signed on as a summer waiter in a high-end French restaurant on the Jersey shore. In winter months, he skied and traveled South America and Asia, sampling local cuisines. His athleticism influenced his concept of nutrition, and by age 26, he knew he would open his own restaurant.

"I wanted to go to culinary school," he says, "but not to the schools where 'butter equals better,' and where copious amounts of butter and cream are the norm."

Instead, he enrolled in a six-month program at the Natural Gourmet Institute in Manhattan. "I found out about it when I worked at Organic Planet, an eatery in Greenwich, Connecticut," Alec says. "The program wasn't great training for operating a restaurant, but I learned to cook for people on special diets, primarily vegetarian and Ayurvedic style."

His first restaurant concept grew from that experience—center the menu on health foods, possibly in an all-vegetarian kitchen. But while interning in a vegan spot in Seattle, Alec realized he didn't want to eliminate so many potential diners with such limited offerings. His next stint, in a high-end French restaurant in Seattle, was

“awesome,” he says. “It was my first real kitchen job, and the chef and I were the only ones cooking. On his nights off I ran the kitchen and learned so much.”

Next, Alec and his wife, Gabriella Schuler, Venezuelan-born of Italian and Basque heritage, moved to coastal southern Spain, where Alec again cooked in a high-end French restaurant, this time under the tutelage of a 65-year-old chef. “I love Spanish-style seafood,” Alec says. “It’s so simple, with fresh olive oil, a little garlic, parsley and lemon.”

Arugula’s calamari scampi, he says, is evocative of its Spanish cousin. “I spice it up at the restaurant with extra garlic, tossing it in flour and sautéing for a minute. It’s a calamari steak, but scampi is the best way to describe it because of those familiar flavors.”

Back in Boulder in 2004, Alec worked at L’Atelier Restaurant, rising to kitchen manager, and at Treppeda’s Italian Ristorante in Niwot, where he was able to develop the nighttime menu and refine his system of organization.

“I started looking for a place to open Arugula in 2007, two years before we actually opened,” Alec says. “During that time I went back to L’Atelier as a line cook and was busy with our two young sons, Bruno and Sandro.”

Rarely do customers stumble into Arugula, given its location in a small shopping area in north Boulder, but the restaurant has a devoted regular clientele. “I haven’t had to change the regular menu, just tweak it,” Alec says. “My customers understand my cooking style after eating here a few times, and are appreciative of it. Boulder diners want to eat this way. And here, they can eat a three-course meal and feel good at the end. And our portions are not small.”

[Karen Mitchell is a Boulder freelance writer who over-butters her croissants.](#)

From Executive Chef Alec Schuler, Arugula Bar e Ristorante

SAUSAGE AND GOAT CHEESE PENNE

- 14 ounces penne pasta
- 5 links good-quality Italian sausage, raw, cut into ¾-inch slices
- 1 large yellow onion, thinly sliced
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil, divided
- 3 cloves garlic, roughly chopped
- 3 sage leaves, large, torn
- 6 Roma tomatoes, diced
- 2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
- 1 small bunch parsley
- 1 cup crumbled goat cheese, loosely packed

Cook penne in generously salted water until al dente. While pasta is cooking, sauté sausage and onion in half of the olive oil over medium heat until sausage is almost cooked through. Add and briefly sauté garlic, sage and tomatoes. Add balsamic vinegar and turn off heat; hold sauce until pasta is ready.

When the penne has cooked, add to the sauce and sauté over low heat for an additional 1 to 2 minutes. Remove from heat. Add remaining olive oil, chopped parsley and crumbled goat cheese. Toss and serve immediately.

Makes 4 servings.

BELGIAN ENDIVE SALAD

The vinaigrette yields about 4 cups; enough for many more salads.

Sherry Vinaigrette

- ½ cup sherry
- 1 small shallot, chopped
- ½ clove garlic, chopped
- 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
- 2 teaspoons honey
- 1 cup grape seed oil (or other non-taste oil)
- ½ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 4 large heads of Belgian endive
- 1 teaspoon fresh thyme, minced
- 1/3 cup of toasted walnuts, lightly crushed
- ½ cup crumbled gorgonzola cheese

Sherry Vinaigrette: Place sherry, shallot, garlic, mustard and honey into blender. Turn on low and slowly add the two oils to emulsify. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

Cut endive perpendicular into ¼-inch sections. Toss with ½ cup of the Sherry Vinaigrette and thyme. Divide into 4 salads and top with walnuts and gorgonzola.

Makes 4 servings.