

## Tucson Citizen -- Primo features top chef, local fixings

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--Tom Stauffer

Some guy from Peoria who is here for the National Association of Hose and Accessories Distribution conference probably knows more about one of the best restaurants in town than the average Tucsonan.

Sure, it's cloaked in a resort with three other eateries way out on the West Side, only serves dinner, is not a member of the Tucson Originals, and is a chain of sorts, though it's a chain with just three links.

Still, with a chef as celebrated as Melissa Kelly at the helm and a menu this dedicated to local sourcing, organic produce and overall excellence, it's a little surprising that Primo has flown under Tucson's collective culinary radar for most of its four years at the JW Marriott Starr Pass Resort & Spa.

Kelly, who among other accomplishments, won the James Beard Foundation award for Best Chef: Northeast in 1999, shuffles among Primos in Maine, Florida and Tucson. That she has out-located the locals in dedication to organic, locally produced ingredients and the way they're showcased at her Mediterranean eatery speaks to her lifelong dedication to rustic, family-style food and her considerable résumé in fine dining.



RENEE BRACAMONTE/Tucson Citizen

Primo doesn't just talk the local talk, sprinkling a few herbs from the chef's garden and calling it good. That was clear from the onset on a recent visit with the arrival of the Salad of Roast Beets (\$10). Thin petals of beets cloistered a mousse-like core of Black Mesa Ranch goat cheese topped with a crunchy fresh, bright green frisée and studded with meticulously sectioned blood oranges.

This is one of those dishes that arrives in such an artful form you're convinced it couldn't possibly taste as good as it looks. It didn't. It tasted even better. It wasn't so much the superior quality of the beets, goat cheese and other characters or their flawless preparation - though that certainly didn't hurt matters - as much as the truly inspired way they were teamed. That beets and goat cheese would have me waxing this rhapsodic is a testament to the excellence at work here.

Our other starter, the Antipasti Misti (\$14), featured Pancetta, Mortadella and Genoa Salami sliced paper-thin, juxtaposed to quarter-inch thick wedges of artisan cheeses, and rounded out by a smattering of sweet peppers and diminutive olives.

The Braised Lamb Ravioli (\$25) was emblematic of a recurrent theme at work here, a seemingly contradictory marriage of rustic, family-style comfort and five-diamond-level precision and presentation.

The lamb in the trio of large house-made ravioli had an uninhibited, earthy piquancy that was set off by the sweetness of roasted red peppers and fresh pea shoots, the pungency of roughly crumbled feta, and the smokey, near meaty pay-off of thick-sliced roasted eggplant. This was an aggressively flavored entree, one that proved that showcasing organic elements doesn't always have to be a delicate dance.

Our other entree, the Grilled Mahi Mahi (\$28) was equally rustic yet refined, with the grilled fish possessing an elegant luster and delicate flakiness. That polish was intriguingly countered by a pair of rustic Italian comforts, *panelle* and *pepperonata*, the former a crisp chickpea polenta cake and the latter a melange of stewed peppers, onions, tomatoes and garlic in olive oil. Grilled artichokes and crisp arugula nicely rounded out the affair.

We kept to the Italian classics with desserts - Hand made Cannoli and "Zeppole" (both \$8.50). The pair of large cannoli dipped in chocolate were considerably upgraded over the traditional versions, as the sweet ricotta filing was studded with pistachios and served with tangy, purple Amarena cherries. Zeppole are Italian doughnuts that lack holes but more than make up for with an eggy, brioche-like interior and a fritter-like exterior. We were expecting a small collection of diminutive Zeppole, but were served a bowl of 10 hand-ball-sized gems.

There are three other eateries at Starr Pass, which take some of the pressure off Primo to appeal to what can be an overly wide demographic of guests. That allows it to have a decidedly nonresorty menu. At the same time, the eatery takes advantage of the pluses a resort can provide - a great view, a dining room with lots of room between tables, and a notably intimate, soft-sounding space dampened with thick carpet, a refreshing departure from the norm of stained concrete and the din it creates.

Anyone who has shopped for organic food knows it isn't cheap, and consequently, neither is Primo. Even by resort standards, moderate-size entrees that round to \$30 may be off-putting to some, particularly given the times. A restaurant that does as earnest and masterful a job at walking the locally sourced, organic walk as this unsung gem is worth those prices and then some.