

AFM Taste Test: The House at Secret Garden

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Thursday, 17 February 2011 09:20 - Last Updated Thursday, 17 February 2011 09:30

We're spilling the beans: The House at Secret Garden dishes up a farm-fresh menu in a cozy hideaway that makes you forget you're minutes from bustling Central Phoenix.



There's a spot near Central Phoenix that Valley dwellers visit to escape busy city life and settle into a more rustic and relaxed state of mind: The Farm at South Mountain. As of October, there are now two places locals can retreat to. However, we're confident that the folks at The Farm at South Mountain aren't too disgruntled with their new neighbor; The Farm's manager, Pat Christofolo, is the co-owner of the new House at Secret Garden.

It's impossible not to compare The House at Secret Garden, which opened in the fall, with Quiescence restaurant at The Farm at South Mountain. Both Phoenix restaurants offer guests farm-to-table fare in a setting that could very easily be mistaken for your Aunt Mildred's dining room—in a good way. While Quiescence switches up its bill of fare daily, The House changes its menu more seasonally or, according to Christofolo, when it feels right. After a taste of The House's incredible fresh fare, Quiescence's little sibling certainly aspires to join it at the head of the table within this family of dining destinations.

The House at Secret Garden takes residence in an old Spanish mansion, pretty enough for high-end weddings, as the Secret Garden is a special-events venue. The restaurant is divided into several cozy dining spaces so just about any seat in the house is an intimate one. The butterscotch-colored walls and candlelight-bulb sconces result in a romantic setting while the squeaks-when-you-step wood flooring and the snug four-seat bar create dining rooms filled with character and charm. Over the airwaves, the soothing sounds of Willie Nelson, Ray LaMontagne and Tracy Chapman can be heard.

As with The Farm at South Mountain restaurants, The House at Secret Garden showcases as many local, organic ingredients on its menu as possible, starting with its appetizer lineup. The veggie roast spotlights goodness from The House's own on-site garden (which is maintained by Heather Taylor who also oversees Chris Bianco's garden) as well as from nearby Maya's Farm at South Mountain. The browned-on-the-edges baguette is layered with roasted fennel, sweet carrots, butternut squash, fresh arugula and feta from Black Mesa Ranch. The yellow, green and orange veggies make for a beautiful and delicious presentation.

Another memorable veggie-centric dish is the spiced Tuscan-kale-and-white-bean soup. The soup features a broth of Queen Creek Olive Mill balsamic vinegar, sage and mirepoix (a combination of chopped onions, carrots and celery) and is crowned with delectable Italian sausage, white beans, Tuscan kale and parmesan. The soup manages to be both light, thanks to its sip-able broth, and hearty, due to the slightly spicy chunks of sausage and al dente beans. The dish is finished with a buttered crostini—perfect for soaking up every last bit of broth.

The selection of entrees has something for just about every craving, whether it's a juicy burger, a light fish dish or a filling helping of pasta. The smoked brisket sandwich, topped with arugula, tomatoes, grilled onions, Dijon mustard and melted white cheddar cheese, makes for a satisfying, comforting meal. Each bite of arugula and tomato is bright and delicious against the smoky meat and crunchy bread. The plate of shrimp and grits is yet another winning combination: jumbo shrimp, Anson Mills grits, carrots and sweet corn. The creamy, velvety grits dish is set off with a drizzle of kicky serrano sauce. The polenta fries, an à la carte side, are less impressive as they are too greasy to enjoy without a swipe of a napkin.

Tracy Dempsey, one of AFM's Women Who Move the Valley 2011, is responsible for The House's desserts, which ranges from simple ice cream and cookie offerings to the divine fig-ricotta fritters. The crisp exterior of each warm dough ball is coated in powdered sugar and ready to dunk in the trio of sauces: balsamic syrup, crème fraîche and fleur de sel caramel. While the balsamic syrup brings out each fritter's fig taste, the melted caramel is the dip to devour. The only way to balance out a meal of healthful, farm-fresh eats? A dessert of warm dough swaddled in gooey caramel.

To Learn More:

The House at Secret Garden

2501 E. Baseline Rd., Phoenix.

www.houseatsecretgarden.com.

Chef: Dustin Christofolo

Hours: Monday through Saturday, 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. (lunch);

Monday through Thursday, 5 to 9 p.m. (dinner);

Friday and Saturday, 5 to 10 p.m. (dinner).