

Fancy Feast

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In the wake of the demise of the Valley's top tie-friendly dining destinations (Mary Elaine's, Marquesa), we were aching for a spot to turn to when we feel like donning our Sunday's best to dinner. Just in time, Scottsdale's SouthBridge unveiled a restaurant that's puttin' on the ritz.

It's no coincidence that Estate House opened on Valentine's Day. The SouthBridge eatery simply oozes romance—swanky, swoon-worthy romance. In fact, the loveliness can't even be contained to one dining room, one patio or even a single story. The two-story, mansion-style restaurant is divided into several sections: a main dining room, a Champagne bar, two private dining areas (the handsome upstairs den and the relaxed downstairs conservatory), a lush lounge complete with piano accompaniment and four outdoor seating areas (with the second-story, see-and-be-seen terrace featuring stunning sunset views, plush seating and a fire pit). Yes, this list is a bit overwhelming on paper; in person, however, it just works.

You'll find a space dedicated to whatever mood you might be in—watching the sunset with your sweetie in the lounge, lingering over bubbly and caviar at the Champagne bar, indulging in course after decadent course in the dining room during an anniversary celebration. For this occasion, we opted to dine on the alfresco patio, just off the main dining room. The area is vibrant with potted fauna and flora, and lantern lighting; and it has a crisp, French-inspired feel. Plus, the patio is located alongside the promenade walkway and offers prime people watching, though we never felt like we were on display to passersby.

As we watched the skies start to darken and shoppers merrily strolling by on the walkway, we whet our whistle with the pear Alsace martini. The concoction of vodka, pear brandy, pear purée, pinot gris syrup, lemon juice and a lovely fan of Anjou pear slices was one of the best cocktails we've laid lips on. While some fruity tipples can taste too sweet or artificial, each sip of this martini was like taking a bite into a just-plucked pear.

Once our thirst was quenched, we ordered up the spring pea risotto starter and the salad of butter lettuce and Fuji apples. The risotto was topped with trumpet royal mushrooms and creamy parmesan. Apart from being the most perfect shade of garden green, the varying textures were quite appealing to the palate. The salad, rounded out with Maytag cheese, roasted beets and red wine dressing, was likewise delicious with its perfectly crisp apples and flawless lettuce leaves.

For the main courses, we opted for the rare, seared ahi tuna and the grilled beef rib-eye. The beef, which was paired with cipollini and foraged mushrooms and crusted in rosemary and garlic, was sizable and tender. And though the tuna was a tad too salty, the petite root veggies that accompanied the dish were divine. The parsnips and carrots had just the right amount of snap, and the plump potatoes were soft without squish.

Though the fab fare definitely left a lasting impression, perhaps the most memorable moment of the evening involved Paul Xanthopoulos, Estate House's master du soigner, or master of looking after. (You might remember him from his post as the director of romance at Royal Palms Resort and Spa.) His job is to make sure diners have the best possible experience, even if that involves arranging limo service, floral displays or party planning. Basically, thanks to him, every diner is destined to feel like a V.I.P. After providing some sage, some witty relationship advice, which was along the lines of "the woman is always right," he gave us a top-to-bottom tour of the entire restaurant. As we weaved in and out of every nook and cranny, it was apparent to us that Xanthopoulos takes as much pride in Estate House as if it the upstairs den were his own living room and each diner was a longtime friend.