Food to Love

Gluten-Free Options Boost a Stellar Menu

Executive Chef Arturo Casillas

Acqua Pazza may be a difficult name to pronounce or even to remember, but the food they serve is hard to forget. Acqua Pazza has built as fine a reputation for great meals, reasonable prices and generous servings as any restaurant in the Valley in its seven years in Rancho Mirage.

Two years ago, when the recession hit, owners Jerry and Barbara Keller and general manager Willie Rhine responded by creating a specially priced, three-course menu available every day, in addition to an all-day happy hour menu. Additionally, Executive Chef Arturo Casillas developed breakfast fare which the restaurant began offering at 8 a.m. even though no other business at The River opened until 10 a.m. And in August 2011, the Kellers and Rhine opened their spectacular Lulu bistro in Palm Springs, with menus identical to those at Acqua Pazza. Every day, their recession-busting overtures attract new customers to their popular restaurants.

Perhaps less well known are the special menus embedded within the main menu at both restaurant locations. With the opening of Lulu came a revised menu with new categories: gluten-free and vegetarian. “My granddaughter, who has celiac disease, inspired our gluten-free menu,” says Jerry Keller. [Celiac disease is a digestive condition in which foods containing gluten, a protein, cause an immune reaction in the small intestines.] “We’ve always had dishes that are vegetarian and we serve a lot of fish, so we grouped these in a way that makes them easy to find.”

Chef Casillas also created new gluten-free appetizers, entrées and desserts. His quinoa stuffed acorn squash (see recipe) starts with acorn squash baked to perfection and nestled on a bed of greens. The filling is a combination of the protein-rich grain quinoa, bits of fresh spinach, roasted peppers, corn, and sliced almonds with a small side of orange fig sauce to drizzle over the top. The squash comes butter and oil-free, making it a very healthy option.

Another delicious gluten-free choice is the quinoa and corn spaghetti served checca style with fresh Roma tomatoes, garlic, basil and chunks of fresh mozzarella. This dish can be made dairy-free upon request.

Acqua Pazza’s and Lulu’s breakfast menu also offers a Health Corner section featuring several variations of oatmeal, organic granola with low-fat yogurt and fresh seasonal fruit. The main lunch and dinner menus span a variety of options, from appetizers, salads and pasta dishes to pizza, seafood, lamb, beef and chicken. All desserts are made on the premises by Pastry Chef Karla Casillas.

For excellent food in two beautiful locations, treat yourself to a meal at Acqua Pazza or LULU and enjoy a host of healthy menu options.

Quinoa Stuffed Acorn Squash

QUINOA STUFFED ACORN SQUASH

Serves two as an entrée, up to eight as an appetizer or four as a side dish, each half quartered.

Preparation Time: 1 hour, 15 minutes

Stuffed Squash

1 acorn squash

1/4 cup mixed roasted bell peppers, finely chopped
1/2 cup spinach, finely chopped
1/4 cup cooked sweet corn off the cob [may substitute frozen corn, cooked]
1/8 cup dry figs, diced
1 cup uncooked quinoa, rinsed well
1 3/4 cups water
2 cups mixed greens
1/4 cup sliced roasted almonds

Sauce
1 cup fresh squeezed orange juice
1/2 cup fig preserve

Squash Preparation
Pre-heat oven to 375° Fahrenheit. Cut acorn squash in half, discard seeds, and bake the squash cut-side up on a cookie sheet for 40 to 50 minutes until squash pierces easily with a fork. Allow squash to cool to room temperature.

While squash is cooking, rinse uncooked quinoa thoroughly, place in a two-quart pot with water, cover and bring to a full boil. Once the water is boiling, turn the heat to simmer, cover the pot and cook for 15 minutes (until water is absorbed), stirring occasionally. Remove from heat and set aside, still covered, to cool. If there is excess water, drain before cooling, and fluff with a fork when cool. (Quinoa may be cooked ahead of time and refrigerated.)

Sauce Preparation
In a medium-sized sauce pan, cook orange juice over medium heat to reduce liquid to approximately 1/3 cup. Add the fig preserve and remove from heat. Cool to room temperature.

Final Presentation
In a mixing bowl, combine cooked quinoa, roasted peppers, finely chopped spinach, corn, almonds and diced figs. Place each squash half on a plate of greens and spoon a generous serving of quinoa mixture into squash. Serve each plate with a side of orange fig sauce.

Celiac Disease
Many, but not all, gluten intolerant individuals have celiac disease, which is a lifelong inherited autoimmune condition affecting children and adults. People with celiac disease who eat foods containing gluten experience an immune reaction in their small intestines, causing damage to the inner lining of the small intestine and an inability to absorb certain nutrients. Symptoms may include mild weakness, abdominal pain, chronic diarrhea and progressive weight loss.

Gluten is the name for proteins found in specific grains that are harmful to persons with celiac disease. These proteins are found in all forms of wheat (including durum, semolina, spelt, kamut, einkorn and faro) and related grains rye, barley and triticale.

Individuals with concerns about celiac disease or being gluten intolerant should contact their primary care physician. To find an Eisenhower primary care physician, call 760-773-1460.

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