

Cheeky's No Ordinary Menu Could be the Reason for the Line Outside

By: Maggie Downs



It may sound cheeky, but the worst thing about this Palm Springs eatery is the menu. After all, when everything sounds this enticing, how can you possibly decide what to order?

Will you have the rainbow chard frittata with fried eggplant wheels? Or maybe you're more interested in the pumpkin bread pudding French toast. How about the braised short rib hash with crispy skillet Yukon golds and sunny eggs?

And that's just breakfast. Flip the menu over, and you'll see dozens of lunch options, each one more mouthwatering than the last. No wonder Vogue magazine visited Cheeky's and declared, "Its menu means business."

Cheeky's is a small but mighty cafe, opened in 2008 by Tara Lazar and Marco Rossetti. Located in the former Peppertree bookstore, Cheeky's quickly became an anchor of the ultra-chic Palm Springs Uptown Design District and is now surrounded by sleek furniture stores, art galleries and fashion boutiques.

While most things skew toward the retro in Palm Springs, Cheeky's is a decidedly modern place devoted to setting trends, not staying true to them.

That means Cheeky's was doing local foods before it was cool — it was one of the first restaurants in the Coachella Valley to showcase farm-to-table cuisine, featuring locally sourced ingredients. The food is seasoned with herbs gathered from the on-site herb garden, juice is fresh squeezed and the menu changes weekly to reflect the ripest, tastiest produce of the moment.

Lazar, both owner and executive chef, says her food philosophy has been simple from the start: "Make it from scratch; buy it from a farmer you know."

The result is café fare with a facelift — that is, old favorites with new enhancements. For instance, forget the eggs benedict of the Rat Pack era. Lazar's whimsical take on the dish features a stack of eggs, sautéed arugula, bacon and a creamy Hollandaise on top of fluffy cheddar scones.

Though everything sounds decadent, Lazar said the food is healthy because it is made with fresh, simple ingredients.

"For example, take the sauce from our bestselling huevos rancheros," she says. "If you make it from scratch, you pay attention to every detail. For that sauce, we peel the onion, we chop it up, we know what oil (olive/canola blend) goes in the pan. We see and feel and chop the tomato, because we are confident about where that came from, too. We add the local cilantro and California-grown garlic and garden-grown Serrano chiles. We also get to control how salty our sauce is because we add the salt and pepper. No bases, no artificial enhancers, no tricks. Just real food. And coincidentally, that process actually ends up being healthy!"

Because the chefs know every ingredient that goes into every item, they can be certain every dish meets the highest standard.



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"It serves us as chefs because we can really be in command of our final product — no weird surprises or funny tastes on your tongue," Lazar said. "So you, as a guest, can have the same fresh, real-tasting huevos rancheros time after time." Special diets, like gluten-free, are not only accommodated but indulged, with items like the salty, caramel apple gluten-free waffle topped with chopped nuts. Still, let your server know in advance if special care needs to be taken for allergens. Vegans, vegetarians and those looking for heart-healthy fare will also find palate-pleasing dishes, like the stand-out yam sandwich. (Order without cheese or mayonnaise for vegans).

If you do want to indulge, Cheeky's makes it possible to do that as well. The wildly popular bacon flight is just \$4 and includes bacon samples in a wide variety of flavors, from aggressive and spicy to undeniably sweet. A recent flight included jalapeno, applewood, cinnamon, balsamic and rosemary-sugar bacon, but it changes every week with the menu. The popularity of Cheeky's — where lines are as dependable as the food — has also translated to Lazar and Rossetti's other projects: late-night pizzeria Birba, Asian fusion hotspot Jiao, and boutique hotel Alcazar.

Lazar said the enthusiasm for these restaurants can be attributed to their commitment to always-fresh, always-local flavors. "Besides being our philosophy, it just tastes better that way. Simple as that."