

Sierra: Come for the skiing, stay for the food



Eric Sorensen is a master at the “pour over” coffee venue at Sierra. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Susan Wood

TWIN BRIDGES – Sierra-at-Tahoe has lunged to the top of its game as being a foodie destination this winter.

Four years on the job as food and beverage director, Scott Justice has upped his game at the ski resort’s restaurants, small eateries and satellite food stations.

He’s essentially traded the team sports arenas for playing in a team environment at the slopes for a different sport. Justice came from Center Plate, a concessionaire company that furnishes ballparks with stadium and arena food, having

traveled from the Cajun country of New Orleans to the East Coast culinary flair of Washington, D.C.



Solstice is focusing on Asian flavors like noodle bowls with ahi. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Justice has revamped or tweaked the menus at Sierra Pub, Mama's Kitchen, Solstice, Aspen Grill, 360 Smokehouse BBQ, 360 Grab n' Go, Golden Bear Terrace Grill, Baja Grill, Nacho Mama's, Treehouse Donuts and Java Junction.

He follows trends, keeps an eye on what works and comes up with the food offerings. He has also hired the right people to prepare, cook and serve the items. Sierra-at-Tahoe has long been revered for its community-minded, "get real" philosophy. Now the real deal is its culinary acumen.



Sierra General Manager John Rice and Pub manager Belen Urrutia talk about elevating the food scene. Photo/Kathryn Reed

“You’ll be excited about what we have,” Pub restaurant manager Belen Urrutia said, whipping out a menu she’s proud to have helped contribute to. That’s the forget-the-hierarchy thing with Sierra. Everyone has a role, and good ideas can come from anywhere. Urrutia’s are far reaching geographically, as she hails from Argentina.

Urrutia is especially enthusiastic about the chimichurri steak sandwich on the Pub menu. This diner can see why. A staple in Argentina, the sauce resembles an explosion of flavor. Surprisingly, it’s simple – parsley, olive oil, cilantro, pepper and salt in the unbelievably tasty concoction. Next to the red meat and provolone cheese and red peppers, it’s a complete meal except one needs to make room for the variety of fries, soup or kettle chips it comes with. (Note: you won’t need to eat for the rest of the day and night.)



The chimichurri steak sandwich is inspired by the Pub manager's native Argentina. Photo/Kathryn Reed

What makes working with ski food challenging is catering to that balance between providing the common staples expected at the slopes by thousands of guests while dipping into creative territory. It's also not easy to be efficient and fresh when serving food in bulk.

"We're trying to find that sweet spot in volume," Justice said.

He compliments food supplier Sysco for going out of its way to accommodate the resort, including providing ingredients from the region so it's as local as possible when appropriate.



Susan Wood cuts into chicken and waffles, a first for her. Photo/Kathryn Reed

With all the rage being sustainable, local food, Justice started receiving his barbecue meat for the 360 Smokehouse at the Grandview Lodge from Sonny's BBQ in South Lake Tahoe, where the pork simmers for 14 hours.

As far as the ski area's target audience, the San Francisco Bay Area still rules as the lake region's feeder market. From the Bay comes a large Asian demographic seeking a bit of its home cuisine.

That's why Justice took aim at its latest restaurant on the plaza. Solstice has become enlightened in a big way to serve up dishes that may rival any Asian eatery on the South Shore.

It's one thing to have a Thai chicken lettuce wrap, it's quite

another to serve up ahi chunks atop of a noodle bowl complemented nicely with green onions and carrots. It's best served alongside a Banh Mi sandwich served with gulf coast shrimp, teriyaki beef or tofu (intended as a nod to vegetarians) – an exquisite combination national park-traveling cook Nathan Vandenberg said he whipped up in about five minutes. Aiming to further impress, the Solstice staff hopes to add a miso salmon sandwich.



Scott Justice, who is in charge of all food and beverage operations at Sierra, is able to be more creative at a resort that isn't overly corporate. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Overall, Justice has found the appeal widespread.

"Americans as a whole are getting more adventurous," he told *Lake Tahoe News* on tour of the resort's restaurants.

And the ski area known for its seasoned athletes has expanded

its repertoire of seasonings in the kitchen.

“I believe part of the difference (with ski resort food) runs parallel to food service at stadiums,” said Justice, who grew up skiing at the Pocono Mountains in Pennsylvania.

It used to be stadium food’s reputation rested with hot dogs, chicken tenders, pizza, burgers and fries – which all have a place with “a captive audience” associated with sporting events.



Shrimp and grits represents the Southern flare at Sierra.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

“Today, it’s sushi,” he said. “Anything you want is there. We’re fortunate enough to see that progression.”

Justice would even like to expand into North African flavors in his offerings and beef up the Indian cuisine in the near future.

“Those spices are so different,” he said.

Beyond the flavor, much can be said for style at the Baja Grill. Also in respect to the Bay Area, Justice’s team will summon the Mission-style burrito named after the renowned Mexican food district in The City.

The snow beach outpost at the West Bowl section is extremely popular with the afternoon crowd. Also from the west side, street tacos will round out the menu there by transporting a hungry patron to Mexico. For veggie lovers, Sierra has added a chili relleno burrito there.



Old standbys like chicken tenders and burgers, albeit the latter is grass fed, are still available at Sierra. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Carnivores can order Mama’s mainstay item at the base to start the day – the breakfast “bro-rito,” which is heavy with carnitas, scrambled eggs, shredded cheese and tater tots wrapped in a tortilla. The all-in-one meal satisfies the no-plate-necessary guest – another trend Justice has noticed.

Justice’s staff has even brought a new flair to the

mysteriously popular chicken and waffles dish at Mama's. The fried chicken, albeit doused with syrup, comes with a slightly healthy hint of kale slaw.

For other breakfast offerings, the shrimp and grits will take your taste buds away as a unique, New Orleans-inspired dish that will prompt anyone to give up cereal and oatmeal.

Even the presentation matches, if not exceeds, most lake-level restaurants.

"Presentation is all a part of the food. People eat with their eyes," Justice said.

Indeed, this foodie who admits to cooking at home is a visionary and passes that on to the 120 employees he manages. The team at Mama's on the first floor of the main lodge is usually teeming and bustling with skiers and boarders trying to prepare and fill up for a hardy day on the slopes.

"Teamwork – you can accomplish so much firing on all cylinders," he said.

Most of the food venues are at the base area, giving those who are not skiing or snowboarding an opportunity to eat well, too. Dishes are reasonably priced, and portions ample.



Craft beer is what most people choose to drink at Sierra. Photo/Kathryn Reed

The beverage brigade

Sierra's servings don't just translate to the food. Pairing food with a beverage is all part of the experience.

Forget your grandmother's Folgers. Skiers and boarders can jumpstart the day with a "pour over" coffee blend handcrafted by barista Eric Sorensen. Just smell the Ethiopia Harrar Golecha Natural eight feet away, and your taste buds will want to follow.

Even coffee addicts who junk up their mugs won't want to do that. Drinking it black helps to pick up the mere hints of blueberry.

At the Sierra Pub by midday, it's hard to find a barstool empty on a busy ski day – with riders lined up for rounds of craft beers.

By the end of the day, even visitors streaming into Tahoe up Highway 50 may want to stop in to get a box dinner for those seeking convenience before landing in town. Sierra understands this and aims to accommodate that at Solstice. Bottles of wine

with the Sierra label are available, too – a Zinfandel blend resort staff made with the help of Madroña Vineyards.

Opinion: Calif. will likely screw up legalizing pot

By Joe Mathews

California's 2018 transition to legal marijuana contains a mind-bending paradox: Ending prohibitions on marijuana will require a lot of aggressive law enforcement.

On Jan. 1, California will not merely be permitting adults 21 and older to use marijuana for recreational purposes. The state and its cities will be creating a new regime to regulate and tax cannabis.



Joe Mathews

High times have high stakes: The successful legalization of cannabis in America's largest state could help end the drug war in the United States. But if this transition turns messy, the Trump administration—which is devoted both to debasing California and promoting thoughtlessly tough “law-and-order” policies—could bogart everything, stepping up arrests and penalties for drug violations.

There is reason to worry. Smoking weed is said to expand your mind, but I'm not sure if there is enough marijuana in the state for anyone's brain to comprehend the complexities of all the new rules.

Legalization requires moving a shadowy \$7 billion industry into a highly regulated structure, with extensive taxes and permitting processes. California governments that once took a live-and-let-live approach to cannabis now find themselves having to boost enforcement against cannabis businesses to make sure that companies choose to move out of the black market.

Such policing requires striking difficult balances. If regulatory compliance is too loose, and taxes and permits are too cheap, scofflaws could plague the new industry. But if regulatory compliance is too costly, and taxes and permits too expensive, too many firms might choose to stay in the black market.

At this point, it's hard to be optimistic that California's governments will find that balance.

Among the challenges: the state has been slow to issue regulations to create an interconnected framework of rules covering both newly legal recreational adult use and medical use, which has been legal since 1996 but poorly regulated.

Then there are California's cities, which have tremendous discretion in whether to issue permits, but are in many cases still debating what to do. Those municipalities that have issued rules are creating so many different standards that California's cannabis market will resemble a crazy-quilt.

The federal government is also undermining the transition. By maintaining its prohibition of marijuana, it is creating both legal jeopardy for those in the legal industry and real difficulties with banking, since very few financial institutions will serve businesses selling a product that the

U.S. considers to be an illegal drug. In an acknowledgment that cannabis is likely to remain a mostly cash business, state Treasurer John Chiang has offered to provide armored cars so that cannabis businesses can transport their money when they pay taxes.

Because the industry is badly undercapitalized, it has yet to build out the infrastructure—from compliance systems to lab testing to a strong distribution system—necessary for its new regulated reality.

While attending three cannabis conferences this fall, I was struck by the high anxiety around the conundrum of making a business legal without ending up in trouble over the new rules. These days, marijuana business owners sound a bit like homebuilders—utterly frustrated at the endless delays and NIMBY politics that make it so hard to get permits from California’s local governments.

Many businesses are coping by devoting themselves to California’s real drug of choice: marketing.

The fog of industry propaganda obscures questions about the social transformation under way. And cannabis already resembles other forms of awful American commerce, with varieties of products of dubious necessity: cannaboid eye drops to treat your glaucoma, hemp oil to top your brain seizures, cannabis creams to make your skin glow, and cannabis-infused items to get you off addictive opioids.

There are online marketplaces, specialized software for cannabis businesses, and—my personal favorite—PotBot, an “artificial intelligence” app to recommend marijuana strains that show the most promise in relieving your symptoms.

Amid all this smoke, there are nods to some important issues. Los Angeles and Oakland are among the cities working on “social equity programs” to make sure that communities hurt by the drug war enjoy the benefits of jobs and investment in the

newly legalized market.

Nevertheless, the cannabis industry probably will mirror California's inequality. Poorer communities have been more open to permitting the businesses, while wealthier places have kept them out. In effect, many places with the enforcement resources to shrink the black market and protect legal businesses are sitting this transition out. Marin County has declined to license new retail dispensaries or adult use shops, despite 70 percent voter support there for legalization.

This New Year's Eve will be full of high spirits, especially at midnight when some Californians legally light up for the first time. But the rest of the transition may feel like a bad trip.

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zócalo Public Square.

Many kids still believe in Santa

By Jacqueline Howard, CNN

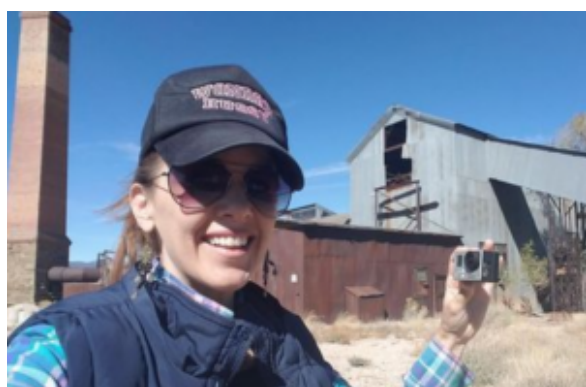
Santa Claus is coming to town – or so about 85 percent of young American children believe.

In interviews, 85 percent of 4-year-olds said that they believed in Santa, 65 percent of 6-year-olds said that they believed, and 25 percent of 8-year-olds said that they believed. Those numbers were published in a small study in the American Journal of Orthopsychiatry in 1978.

But researchers say those percentages of young children who believe in jolly old Saint Nick seem to have remained steady over the years.

Read the whole story

Nude model among Nev.'s prolific explorers



Sarah Jane Woodall has a large following on social media. Photo/Provided

By Reno Gazette-Journal

Three dudes who recently got their toy hauler stuck near Big Dune in Southern Nevada probably didn't expect help to come in the form of an adventuring nude model.

But that's exactly what happened after they wandered into the camp of Sarah Jane Woodall of Las Vegas who models, blogs and posts under the name Wonderhussy.

Woodall described the interaction on Facebook in a post that opened with her applying mascara and led to her and a female

friend breaking out tow straps to make quick work of extracting the stuck rig.

Read the whole story

Nevada lawmakers eyeing traffic law reforms

By James DeHaven, Reno Gazette-Journal

Nevada leaders looking to decriminalize traffic tickets are hoping the third time's the charm.

Fierce resistance from cops, courts and local governments scuttled two past efforts, in 2013 and 2015, to halt arrests over small-time offenses such as an expired driver's license, vehicle registration or car insurance policy.

Not everyone can cough up the cash to take care of those tickets, which can mean jail time for violations as minor as a speeding or fix-it ticket.

Read the whole story

California wildfire now largest in state history

By Robert Jablon, AP

A California wildfire that has killed two people and seared its way through cities, towns and wilderness northwest of Los Angeles became the largest blaze ever officially recorded in California on Friday, authorities said.

The Thomas fire took only 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ weeks to burn its way into history books as unrelenting winds and parched weather turned everything in its path to tinder – including more than 700 homes.

The fire in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties had scorched 273,400 acres, or about 427 square miles of coastal foothills and national forest, according to CalFire.

Read the whole story

Truckee chamber launching business campaign

The Truckee Chamber of Commerce is inviting business owners to come together for 90 minutes every three months in 2018 in order to identify the greatest challenges facing their local business community and to develop creative solutions as a team.

Beginning the week of Jan. 23, the chamber will launch Business Speaks. Eleven distinct “Base Camp” geographic areas within Truckee will be hubs for business owners to come together to discuss how they can address issues facing Truckee as a whole, or an issue specific to their geographic area.

All business owners, including home-based businesses, are invited to attend a meeting in the Base Camp business area

where their business is physically located, however attendance at any meeting that is convenient is also welcome. All meetings are inclusive; you don't need to be a chamber member to attend. Meetings will last just minutes and will be professionally facilitated with a format designed to allow businesses to speak candidly, while fostering conversation that can lead to creative solutions.

To register to attend one of the meetings, go **online**.

LVFPD, Thran's partner to bring trees to needy

The Lake Valley Fire Protection District delivered Christmas trees equipped with stands, lights and ornaments to community members that needed a helping hand this holiday season.

With the help of Katie Long of Thran's Flowers, the district was able to hand deliver and help set up 10 trees for families in need this year.

Thran's donated the trees, stands, lights and ornaments. Capt. Chuck Malone and firefighter/paramedic Dusty LaChapelle made the deliveries.

California's population

doubled since 1970

By Melody Gutierrez, San Francisco Chronicle

If it seems more crowded in California, that's because it is.

California's population is nearly 40 million, a number that has steadily grown despite birth rates declining to the fourth-lowest level in more than a century, according to state estimates released Thursday.

State Department of Finance data showed that between July 1, 2016, and July 1, 2017, California's population grew by 301,000 people to 39.6 million, a growth rate of nearly 1 percent. That's an increase of 2.4 million people since 2010 and double the number of residents who lived in California in 1970.

Read the whole story

No charges to be filed in drowning at MontBleu

A Bay Area family who was in Tahoe for a pre-holiday gathering will never be the same.

Two sisters were with their kids in the indoor pool-hot tub area of MontBleu on Dec. 17. One stepped away, leaving the other in charge.

According to Douglas County sheriff's officials, the remaining sister went to a chair and was on her phone when one of the kids kept trying to get her attention. By that time, it was

too late. Her 4-year-old nephew had been under the hot water too long.

The child was pronounced dead at Barton Memorial hospital after being pulled from the water at about 1:30pm.

No charges will be filed.

This was the third child to die in Douglas County this month. The other two incidents were in the Carson Valley. One infant suffocated after falling between two twin beds, while the other infant aspirated.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*