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EATS, DRINKS & SCOOPS



DINING

roger that

words by JOHANNA HARLOW • *photography by* PAULETTE PHILIPOT



Seeing an out-of-this-world meal? Take a seat at a space-themed dinner, where a rocketship rises from the center of the table and waiters in navy NASA jackets serve up a five-course tasting menu, ferrying over pan-seared scallops and herb-crusted racks of lamb. As for dessert? Cookies decorated like Mercury, Jupiter and Earth with an ice cream moon on a dish glittering with silver stars. After the meal, migrate outside for cocktails and views through the UNISTELLAR, a smart telescope linked to an app



that repositions itself based on what star or planet you select.

It's all part of the immersive NASA Dining Experience at Roger, a restaurant within Mountain View's Ameswell Hotel. Both the hotel and restaurant are flight-themed, inspired by their proximity to the NASA Ames Research Center a mile away. Roger doesn't treat its menu like an afterthought with a captive audience, but instead makes itself a refuge for travelers and a gathering place for locals who come for comedy nights, jazz brunches and other events.

The executive chef here shares Ameswell's same trajectory of reaching for the stars. "I was fortunate in life, in that I've always had a passion," reflects chef Chad Bayless. "I've always had something that's motivating me." Early in life, that was judo. Competing internationally, Chad set his sights on the Olympics. But when an



injury led to surgery on not one, but both knees, he found himself sidelined on the couch. During recovery, Chad watched lots of Food Network and consumed countless episodes of *Iron Chef*. “The competitor in me loved that,” he notes. Rather than return to the dojo, he set his sights on the kitchen.

Do cooking and martial arts have anything in common? “The repetitiveness,” Chad shares with a chuckle. “So much of a chef’s job is *Groundhog Day*. ... Yes, it changes every season, but from the day-to-day standpoint, it’s a lot of the same tasks, and staying focused on those and still doing them with your all, still trying to do better every single day.”

Another early influence came from cooking alongside his moth-

er, a health-conscious devotee of *Cooking Light* magazine. “My mom was a bit famous—or a bit notorious, depending how you look at it—for never cooking the same thing twice,” he laughs. “I’m pretty sure dinner on Monday night was page one. Dinner on Tuesday night was page two. She would just work her way through *Cooking Light*.” He adds, “My dad would be like, ‘Wow, this is really good. Too bad we’ll never eat it again.’”

By contrast, Chad refreshes his menu twice a year with spring-summer and fall-winter offerings. “There will be some signature dishes that will stick around,” he promises. This includes the gambas al ajillo (sautéed shrimp mildly sweetened by white wine and grounded with smoky paprika) as well as albóndigas (lamb meatballs served in an herbaceous mojo verde sauce and brightened

{food coloring}



by the tang of pickled shallots). He says the steak, which delivers a delightful zing from the chimichurri rojo, will also likely stick around.

"I like big, bold flavors," notes Chad. "A lot of times I like using the same ingredient in multiple ways." He explains how dehydrating ingredients or using them in powdered form can add depth. "I'll use fresh blueberries and dry blueberries in the same dish," he describes. "It helps create a more round flavor."

Spotlighting California cuisine with Mediterranean influences—especially from the coastal regions of Spain, France and Greece—Chad seeks to satisfy eaters of all kinds, avoiding dishes that hit the same notes. "The

menu's like an orchestra. So you want to make sure that you have something there for everybody," he says.

As he builds out the menu, Chad collaborates closely with his sous chefs. "I'll cook a recipe eight, nine, ten times—and every single time we're tasting together." He asks them, "What's missing? What can we remove? How can we make this simpler? How can we also make sure it's executable for the team?"

Chad also recognizes the importance of bringing guests and their feedback into the conversation. "If you're a specialized restaurant, you can be a little more niche. In a hotel, yes, you want to be unique and stand out, but you also have people coming that just got off a plane and they're not looking for a culinary adventure right now," observes Chad. "They want to sit at the bar, have a burger and go up to the room and go to bed, you know? So you need to be mindful of having that full range available and doing all

{food coloring}



make it

LAMB ALBÓNDIGAS

These mouthwatering Spanish lamb meatballs pair especially well with bright, herbaceous sauces like chimichurri or mojo verde. Makes 40.

DRESSING

- 2 lbs ground lamb
- 1 red bell pepper, minced
- 2 medium shallots, minced
- 5 cloves garlic, grated or minced
- 1 large egg
- 1½ cups panko breadcrumbs
- ½ bunch cilantro, finely chopped
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 tablespoon Spanish paprika
- 1 teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 1 tablespoon smoked paprika
- 2½ tablespoons kosher salt
- 1 tablespoon black pepper

In a stand mixer with the paddle attachment, combine all of the ingredients. Mix on low speed until everything is evenly combined. Increase to medium speed and mix for about 1 minute, until the mix-

ture becomes slightly sticky and holds together well. If mixing by hand, simply knead the mixture gently for 1–2 minutes until well combined.

Using about 1 tablespoon of mixture per meatball, roll into small balls. Tip: Lightly dampen your hands with water to prevent the mixture from sticking and to help create smoother meatballs. Refrigerate the meatballs for up to 3 days, freeze them for up to 1 month or cook them immediately.

Preheat your oven to 475°F. Generously grease a baking sheet. Arrange the meatballs (defrosted) on the sheet with about ½ inch of space between each one. Bake for 7 minutes, until the bottoms begin to brown and crisp. Carefully shake the pan to roll the meatballs onto another side, then return them to the oven and cook for another 4 minutes, until browned and cooked through. Serve the meatballs hot from the oven.

those at a high level.”

It's certainly not all burgers at Roger. Chad's creativity takes center stage at NASA Dining and 7 Paintings experiences. Blending food, art and technology, each immersive course draws inspiration from a different painter as artful projections flow across the table narrated by Mona Lisa. For the Jackson Pollock course, guests paint with vegetable purees (a beet root pink, kuri squash orange and coconut spinach green), before repurposing their art supplies as salad dressing. The Banksy course has diners

spray an edible canvas—then lift it to reveal *Girl with Balloon* rendered in beef carpaccio beneath.

“Ameswell is one of one,” Chad says with a smile. “It has its own energy. It's very playful. It's very ‘can do’ and it wants to be fun.” That's why at Roger, dinner doesn't just land—it takes off. **P**

rocket to roger

rogerbarandrestaurant.com