

## **‘Foodie’ sings praises of ‘Ode to Tomatoes’ menus**

By Cathe Olson/Contributing Writer

Tomatoes are found in almost every meal — between the condiments on burgers, tossed into green salads, as the sauce for spaghetti, in the salsa on burritos or mashed into ketchup for our fries.

In fact, tomatoes are so common, people may forget they’re even there. But they are about to take center stage in the upcoming “Ode to Tomatoes” celebration.

Inspired by the new tomato garden at Sycamore Mineral Springs, chefs at four Central Coast restaurants have created unique prix fixe dinner menus featuring lush heirloom tomatoes from the Sycamore garden and local farms.

The menus will be available at Marisol at the Cliffs, SeaVenture Resort, Apple Farm and The Gardens of Avila Restaurant from next Thursday through Thursday, Oct. 6.

“We presently are growing over 50 varieties of heirloom tomatoes here at Sycamore Mineral Springs Resort,” said Pandee Pearson, chef at The Gardens of Avila Restaurant located at the resort.

Chef Stephen Walls at Apple Farm Restaurant in San Luis Obispo said he is excited about the event.

“Tomatoes are full of healthy elements, and combined with the right ingredients or by themselves, when in season, homegrown or farmers market tomatoes are one of the most fantastic flavors in the culinary world,” he said.

One of the first course offerings from Apple Farm Restaurant is Walls’ delicious gazpacho made with heirloom tomatoes, cucumber, sweet onion, peppers and basil that is only partially blended so there are lots of crispy chunks of vegetables.

Topped with artesian croutons plus spinach and avocado cream, the soup is incredibly fresh and light, with a spicy kick.

At Marisol at the Cliffs, chef Gregg Wangard offers a unique appetizer: Pineapple Tomato Napoleon, made of seared Texas toast sandwiched between thick slices of pineapple tomatoes and topped with a fried egg.

As the dish is eaten, the egg yolk mixes with the light drizzling of black truffle vinaigrette to create a delectable sauce.

As a second course, one could enjoy the Warm Tomato Tart created by chef Casey Walcott at SeaVenture Resort.

House-made puff pastry is covered with slices of multicolored heirloom tomatoes and topped with basil and buffalo mozzarella for a light, flavorful treat.

Pearson said she is very particular about the tomatoes she uses.

“There are only two seasons in a cook’s year — tomato season and ‘not’ tomato season,” she said. “Tomatoes are truly one product that should only be consumed vine-ripened and at their peak.”

One of the entrees she has created for “Ode to Tomatoes” is a ragout made from short ribs and lightly roasted heirloom tomatoes served over Parisian-style gnocchi that are extra light and delicate because they are made with flour and egg rather than potatoes.

While Gardens of Avila doesn’t list any vegetarian entrees on the menu, Pearson was happy to top the gnocchi with a generous helping of roasted tomatoes for a very satisfying meat-free option.

Pastry chef Willie Vey got creative coming up with tomato-inspired desserts.

All four restaurants will serve a version of her decadent Molten Chocolate Tomato Cake, which is rich and chocolaty and not too sweet.

Another dessert option is Vey’s amazing Upside-Down Green Tomato Caramel Pecan Pie that tastes incredibly like apple pie, but even better.

Each course can be paired with selections from the Sunset Western Wine Awards nominee list.

Chefs and staff at all four restaurants have been working hard to create a memorable event to celebrate these locally grown tomatoes.

“I would like to personally invite everyone to stop by ... and check out our harvest creations. It’s been a labor of love,” Pearson said.

Cathe Olson is the author of “Simply Natural Baby Food, The Vegetarian Mother’s Cookbook” and “Lick It! Creamy Dreamy Vegan Ice Creams Your Mouth will Love.” For more information, visit her website at [www.simplynaturalbooks.com](http://www.simplynaturalbooks.com) or follow her blog at <http://catheolson.blogspot.com>.