

Posh, 4.5 stars

by **Howard Seftel** - May. 5, 2009 10:45 AM
Republic restaurant critic

It takes guts to go against the flow. When the whole world is zigging, only fools or daredevils risk zagging. But that's also how talented people separate themselves from the pack.

Posh

When: [Dinner](#), 5 p.m. to close, Tuesdays through Saturdays.

Details: 7167 E. Rancho Vista Drive (Optima Camelview Village, [Scottsdale](#) Road just north of Camelback), Scottsdale. 480-663-7674.

Rating: 

Price: \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

Struggling to stay afloat in this dismal economy, most restaurants are coping in the same predictable fashion: trimming costs, scaling back quality and promoting value. They're also cutting down on gastro-adventure. According to common wisdom, even higher-end diners are suffering from recession anxiety and are in no mood for unconventional new concepts, offbeat ingredients and ingenious preparations.

So it's surprising to see how chef Joshua Hebert, who gave the southeast Valley some tantalizing fine-dining moments a few years ago at Dual, is boldly zagging his way onto the Valley's destination-restaurant list.

There's no fixed menu. Hebert's sophisticated "improvisational" cuisine asks diners to arrange the outlines of a small-plate, multicourse dinner from a daily-changing list of main ingredients. Most folks will opt for the five- (\$55), six- (\$65) or seven-course dinner (\$75), which includes appetizer and dessert. You can expect to see everything from lamb to kangaroo, Kobe beef to venison, chicken to quail and octopus to barramundi. (Vegetarian dishes and meals also are available.) Check off your likes and dislikes. Indicate how you'd like the meat and fish cooked. There's even space to note allergies. Then Hebert puts his imagination, technique and arsenal of peak-of-season produce to work. I ate 40 dishes over the course of several meals, and not once did the chef repeat himself.

For best results, come as a duo and sit at the counter, where you can schmooze with Hebert and watch the show.

The meal spools out at a civilized pace, 2 1/2 hours. But I didn't look at my watch from the moment I arrived until the moment I left.

That's because I was so deeply involved in the dish parade. Hebert doesn't believe in going through the cliched motions. He also doesn't believe in starting slow and building to a climax. Posh roars off in fifth gear, and doesn't let up.

Hebert might start you off with a salad of grilled endive and baby romaine, or a delightfully avant-garde mix of avocado, blood orange and nuts with a touch of chocolate shavings. Or maybe you'll get really lucky and come on a night when he's lading out his intensely flavorful roasted red-pepper soup.

Hebert isn't afraid to step back and let his ingredients shine. That's often the case with the superb seafood, which is worth building a tasting menu around. Among the highlights: loup de mer ([sea bass](#)) with polenta and chanterelles; sweet scallops with English peas and fava beans in a red-pepper coulis; barramundi in a light truffle sauce; manila clams in wine sauce; and mahi-mahi with shaved fennel.

He extends that same unfussy approach to meat. And why not, when you're working with Japanese Kobe with charred scallions; venison with pickled ramps; lamb chops with gnocchi; and lean, pleasantly gamy kangaroo with English peas?

But Hebert does more than source top-quality ingredients. He can be fanciful without crossing the line to weird, and he can execute. Take the quail in a scintillating orange gastrique with balsamic onions, and his clever twist on bacon and eggs, made with smoked duck, an egg yolk and bits of asparagus. A couple of deconstructed, pasta-sheet "lasagnas" were also striking: one topped with ground rabbit and roasted tomato; the other topped with sweet shrimp in a delicate lemongrass broth. And he makes trout sing by teaming it with couscous and a lusciously clever pine-nut cream.

If you can rationalize additional splurging, the foie gras torchon (\$15 supplement) is the place to do it. After slicing off a buttery, cognac-laced disk, Hebert sprinkles on sugar and whips out his blowtorch, caramelizing the surface creme brulee-style. Trust me: You will have no second thoughts about the expense.

You may think that if there is one course you can skip, it's cheese. However, that would be a strategic blunder. Hebert gets his hands on some great European cheeses, the kind you rarely encounter in Arizona. I don't see how any cheese-lover can turn down the opportunity to spread griddled focaccia with Italy's tangy, Brielike La Tur or sweet, mild Robiola; France's ultra-rich and creamy Explorateur; or Valdeón, a snappy Spanish blue.

Desserts maintain momentum. The most eye-catching are made on the Anti-Griddle, a wondrous piece of equipment which instantly freezes sauces and purees, and does marvelous things to fruit. The frozen watermelon and Meyer lemon lollipop bring dinner to a highly refreshing conclusion. And while not quite so 21st century, the white chocolate

mousse with a Callebaut chocolate plaque, and chocolate paté with buttermilk panna cotta and huckleberry sauce, leave a happy final impression.

Wine plays a key element in Posh's appeal. First, it's affordable. You can pair the five-course meal with wine for \$30, while the six- and seven-course add-on is \$34.

But even more gratifying are the sommelier's selections, which make very few nods to the mainstream. Some of the more intriguing whites we had included refreshing Italian Pecorino (the grape, not the cheese) from Abruzzo, crisp Txakolina from Spain's Basque country and the outstanding Turley White Coat, a blend of three fashionable Rhone varietals, Roussanne, Marsanne and Viognier. The reds were just as effective, like the almond-y Dolcetto D'Alba from Italy's Piedmont and Lioco Indica, a lusty California blend of Carignan and Petite Syrah. We got luxury pours, too, like Montaudon Champagne to start one evening, and magnificent Chateau Rieussec, one of the great French Sauternes, to pair with the foie gras.

Posh's sleek, spare decor defies convention as much as the concept. Apart from the cool canvas panels stretched across the ceiling, there's just about nothing in the way of art (or music) to distract you. You're here to eat, talk and watch how dinner comes together.

One question remains: How is Posh going to handle success? It's one thing for Hebert to make a one-on-one customer connection when maybe 15 or 20 diners show up. But what's going to happen when the 65 counter and table seats start filling up? Will he have time to talk about his fish supplier, his year in Japan or how he makes beet leather? Instead of lingering to explain the delights of an Italian white made from the Kerner grape, a varietal most Americans have never heard of, will the sommelier have to pour and run?

I have no way of knowing. But I do know that it's worth zagging your way here to find out.

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