

# SUCCESS STORIES

taos county and the moreno valley

## The Blonde Bear Tavern and Café Naranja offer Alps charm and New Mexico style

By Andy Dennison

The combination of the flair of the European Alps and hominess of Northern New Mexico has always been a big part of what makes Taos Ski Valley so unusual in the American Rockies. And, over the decades, the Edelweiss Lodge and Spa has always been a key player in enhancing that image.

In the past couple of years, the Edelweiss has written a new chapter in its 40-year history of providing luxury, ski-in ski-out accommodations in the base village of Taos Ski Valley. Rebuilt and redefined following a devastating fire, the Edelweiss Lodge and Spa brand now has established itself among the most luxurious lodging options at the resort — and the Southwest.

And that includes fine dining.

With the hiring of New York restaurateur/chef Jon Mudder in 2011, The Blonde Bear Tavern and the Café Naranja at the Edelweiss have become the places to go for what Mudder calls “Alpine comfort food.”

“When he hired me, (Manager) Kent Forté told me to create the menu,” Mudder says. “I started thinking about what TSV was all about, and I asked the question, ‘After a long day on the slopes, what do you want to eat?’”

What developed has been a menu that pays homage to both the Taos Valley and TSV’s rich connection with the traditions of winter resorts in northern Italy, France, Austria and Bavaria. As the menu says, “Our menu gives you a taste of classic dishes from those regions (where skiing originated) interpreted through the casual laid-back attitude for which Taos Ski Valley is known.”

The bill of fare at The Blonde Bear Tavern is dominated by hearty offerings to replenish skiers and snowboarders at day’s end. Many dishes come with a local flair — and all of them come with a touch of the old country.

For instance, Café Naranja’s breakfasts come with the typical red-or-green sauce options, only Mudder creates the roux with olive oil rather than butter to retain more flavor. The Elk Roast Braised in Red Wine is an elk shoulder from the newly opened Laguna Elk Ranch in Taos. Mudder pre-salts the meat in a dry brine and braises it for nine hours before serving. There’s trout from Northern New Mexico rivers, served with red grapes and balsamic sauce. Or, the classic *Boeuf Bourguignon* served over fresh buttered noodles.

And the management has kept



Chef Jon Mudder with sisters and co-workers Ruth Romero and Martha Galindo.

Andy Dennison



Jeff Caven

Delicious and attractive meals are part of the equation.

the price modest as possible: “Fine diners, locals and Ski Valley employees alike are welcome and able to find food they’ll love at a reasonable price,” Mudder says, “Our food and atmosphere are refined, but the service is relaxed and family friendly.”

As much as possible, he tries to purchase locally grown produce and meats. This winter, the Sautéed Chicken Paillard comes with chanterelle mushrooms picked on the slopes of the Sangre de Cristos. And, always, Mudder puts a European flair into the local foodstuffs.

“That’s what people want, a taste of local foods that is both sophisticated and simple,” says Mudder. “Simple food is hard to do right. You don’t rely upon some fancy sauce to give it taste. It has to stand on its own. I’m big into the seasonality of food. We humans follow the cycles of the earth, so we eat tomatoes in late summer and crave citrus in winter.”

The restaurant’s wine program pairs each entrée with a top-class wine. “The wine is just as important as the food,” says the chef. “I see wine as a sauce that enhances the meal. In a sense, one plus one is three at The Blonde Bear Tavern.”

Many of the wines come from vineyards that Mudder himself has visited in Italy, France and the United States. He prefers family owned vintners that have been operating for more than a generation: “That’s where there’s passion in their wines,” he says.

And, the chef makes sure that his staff understands how wine amplifies food with daily “family meals” in the late afternoon.

“It’s a chance for us all to get together and appreciate what we are serving,” the chef says. “I know it sounds corny, but if your staff comes with love of the food and serving it with love, then it will find its way into the quality

of service.”

Speaking of staff, Mudder is proud that most everyone who worked for him during his first season at Edelweiss has returned. Longtime visitors and locals will recognize bartenders Rushan Perera and Kelci Pike. A pair of sisters, Ruth Romero and Martha Galindo, heads the cooking team, and newcomers Emily Murphy-Darling and Hayley Hixon are the baristas at Café Naranja, where returning morning chef Beau Haworth cooks up the popular Breakfast Burritos and Huevos Rancheros.

“It’s important to what we are doing to have local people working here,” Mudder says.

There are, of course, challenges to creating gourmet cuisine in the mountains, not the least of which is water just doesn’t get as hot.

“The altitude affects everything,” he says. “For one thing, it takes pasta about 20 minutes to cook, which is way too long for a restaurant. So we make our own, fresh pasta that cooks faster. With pastries, you have to cut back on the yeast, baking soda and baking powder because things rise quicker up here.

“On the cool side, though, there’s nothing like making a soufflé at high altitude,” Mudder says with a laugh. “Overall, it’s been trial and error for us that has produced food that is truly connected to the place where it is made.”

Check out Chef Mudder’s blog, “Chef’s Blog: Cooking, Wine and Gardening at 10,000 feet,” at [www.bellavita.com](http://www.bellavita.com)

### The Blonde Bear Tavern

Open daily. Après Ski: 3:00 p.m.;  
Dinner: 5:30 p.m.  
(575) 737-6900, ext. 6996  
[www.blondebeartavern.com](http://www.blondebeartavern.com)

### Café Naranja

Open daily. Breakfast: 7:30 a.m.  
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Both are located within the  
**Edelweiss Lodge and Spa**  
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Bartenders Kelci Pike and Rushan Perera.

Jeff Caven