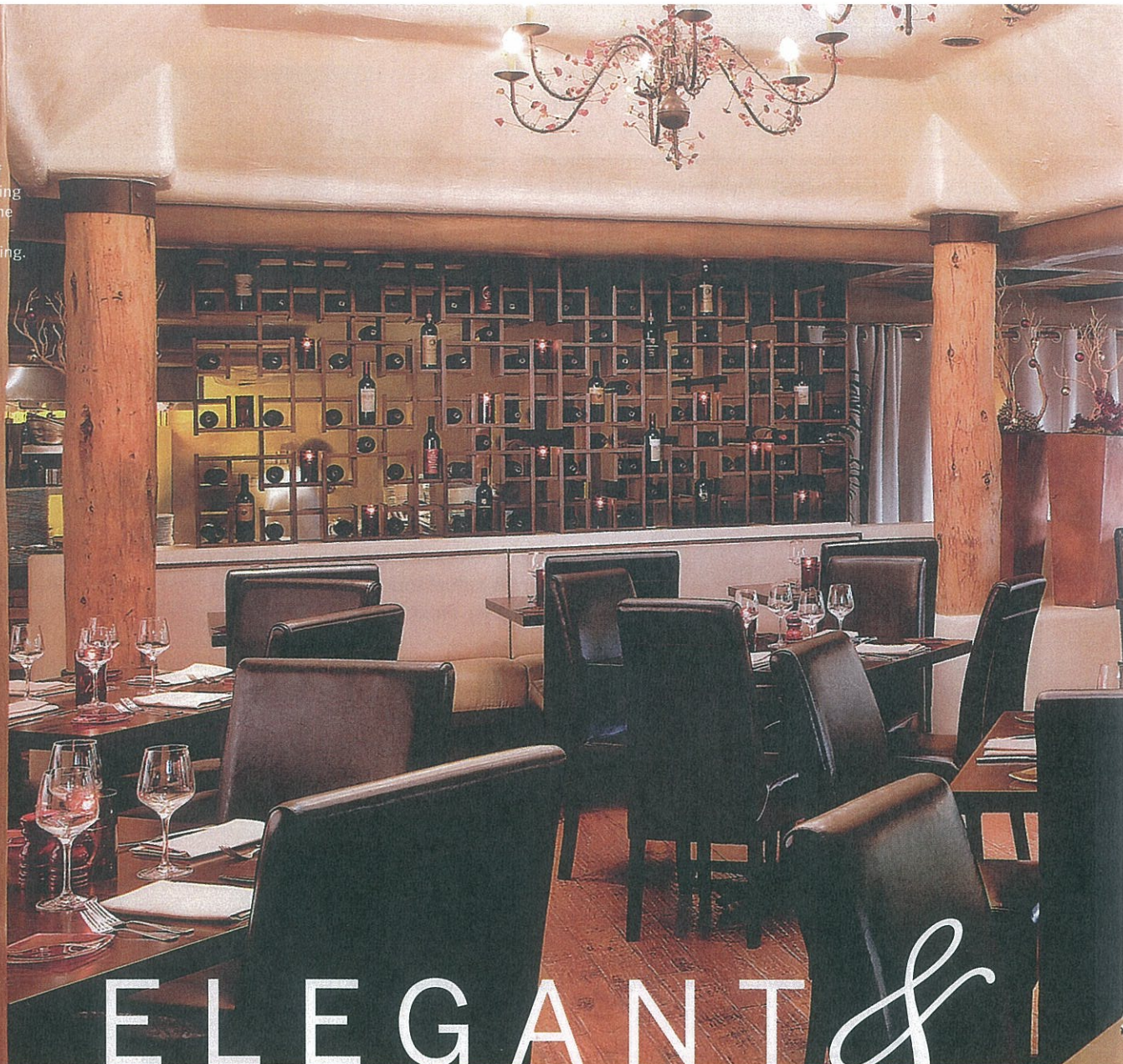


The rustic simplicity of Taggia's dining room sets the tone for a serene evening.

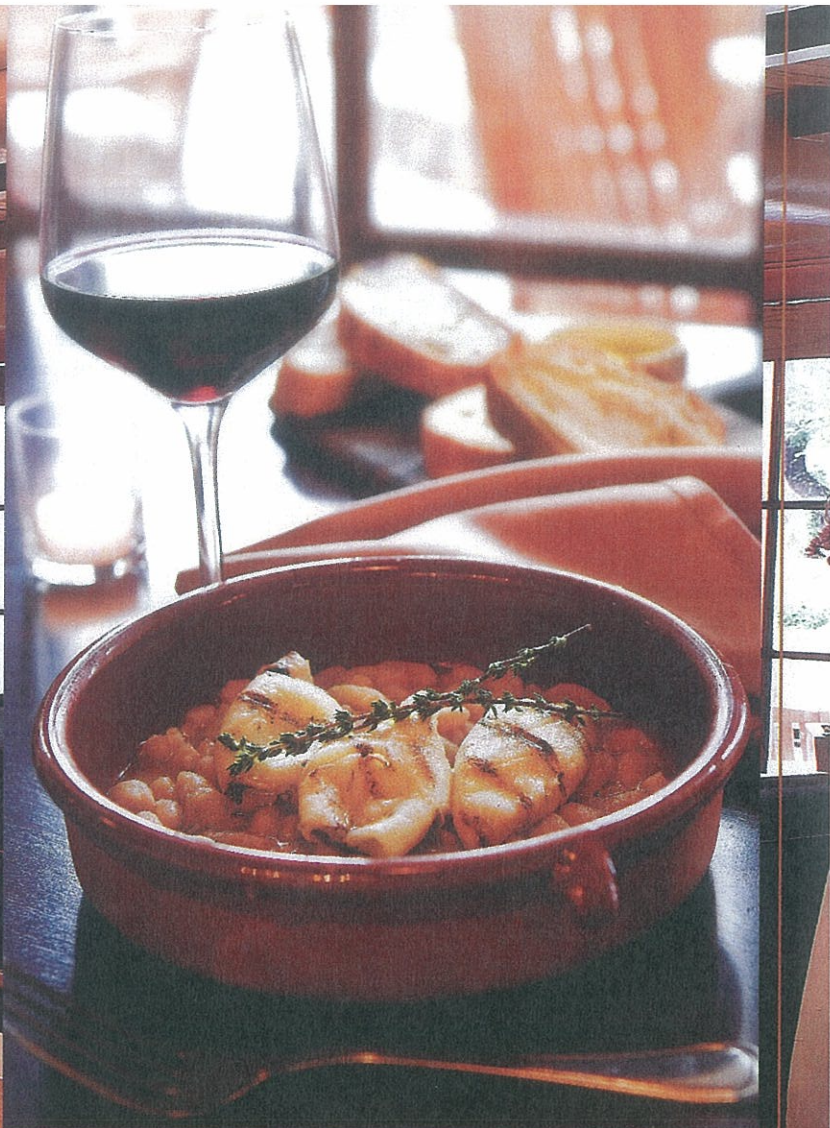


ELEGANT & ORGANIC

Don't let the word "organic" fool you. Organic food has come a long way since tofu and bean sprouts. Some of the most elegant and celebrated local restaurants serve gourmet organic meals prepared by distinguished master chefs. No need to be a yogi, know your aura color, or eat only vegetarian to enjoy these award-winning establishments. With menu offerings such as Desert Mint and White Sage Tea Marinated Duck Breast with Membrillo and Foie Gras Tart or Roasted Beet and Fennel Salad with Grilled Diver Scallops, you'll savor

the highest quality ingredients, many harvested in local organic gardens that support sustainable agriculture.

You might ask, "What exactly is organic?" Simply stated, organic produce and ingredients are grown without the use of pesticides or synthetic fertilizers. And animals that produce meat, poultry, eggs, and dairy products aren't fed antibiotics or growth hormones. "But, why organic?" you might add. Because it tastes terrific and it's free from additives—so it's good for you and good for the planet.



BY *Amy Abrams*
 PHOTOGRAPHY BY *David B. Moore*

GREEN GOURMET FARE TO TEMPT YOUR PALATE

At **Taggia**, a coastal Italian-inspired restaurant at FireSky Resort & Spa, each creation relies on quality ingredients. Chef Ehron Litzenberger prepares innovative offerings using farm-fresh produce, most grown organically right in town. Here seafood stars. Fresh-as-can-be Dungeness crab (shipped live, overnight and over ice), served as an appetizer over just-picked watercress, crisp cucumbers, and Fuji apples, arrives at the table in a light dressing that allows natural flavors to shine. Or try tender grilled calamari over earthy Umbrian beans and purple scallions.



↑ (top) Savor tender calamari on a bed of Umbrian beans.
 (bottom) Crab-filled ravioli is just the dish for pasta lovers.

ALFRESCO DINING DOESN'T GET MUCH BETTER THAN THIS

While this top chef will happily prepare the sizzling pizzas on the menu (including mozzarella, arugula, prosciutto crudo, and parmigiana), I go for clams, mussels, shrimp, and scallops in an aromatic seafood broth over perfectly al dente pasta—*fantastico*! Serious pasta fans also swoon over ravioli filled with sautéed mushrooms, asparagus, and chunky crab. The full flavors at Taggia prove that additive-free foods enhance, never sacrifice, taste. Wholesome foods and elegant simplicity are underscored in a host of desserts including Olive Oil Cake

with Orange Coffee Jam. The jam hails straight from Sicily and the olive oil from an Arizona olive farm in nearby Queen Creek.

The rustic simplicity of the dining room—wood-beamed ceiling, Stickley-inspired chairs, the soothing sounds of water fountains amid candlelight—sets the stage for a serene and romantic evening. The room also opens to a sensational outdoor dining patio. Alfresco dining doesn't get much better than this—sitting poolside by stone pillars towering skyward, topped with dramatic flames. The impressive feature draws guests' gazes upward toward the twinkling stars in the vast Arizona sky.

With hand-picked ingredients from their plentiful on-site organic garden, Chefs Wendy Little and Brad Miller create culinary masterpieces at **The Latilla**, a multi-award-winning and longstanding AAA-rated Four-diamond restaurant at The Boulders Resort and Golden Door Spa. With all free-range meats (including elk flown in from New Zealand) and fresh seafood (responsibly fished from clean waters), these two masters cook up imaginative combinations with powerhouse presentations.

You'll count your lucky stars if you begin, as I do, with tartar and spicy tuna in a soy ginger glaze with fermented black beans. Melt-in-your-mouth sushi-grade tuna is wonderfully enhanced by an Asian-inspired glaze and presented like a work of art. A not-overly creamy roasted cauliflower soup is skillfully flavored with fragrant rosemary, bacon, and tender lobster.

With more than 14 years of experience in organic cooking, Chef Little describes herself as a "straight-forward cook" and her food as "honest," letting seasonal ingredients speak for themselves. So while innovative combinations entice (poached lobster with sweet corn, goat cheese, and truffle; oven-roasted guinea hen with wild-boar bacon, oyster mushrooms, and salsify), I go with a heartier, back-to-the-earth entrée, which is superb: rack of lamb with three kinds of potatoes and tomato ragout. My knife slips through the tender, center-pink medallions surrounded by sautéed mushrooms and richly spiced potatoes and covered in a thick, garden-fresh tomato ragout. Each dish also has suggested organic wine pairings for perfect taste combinations.

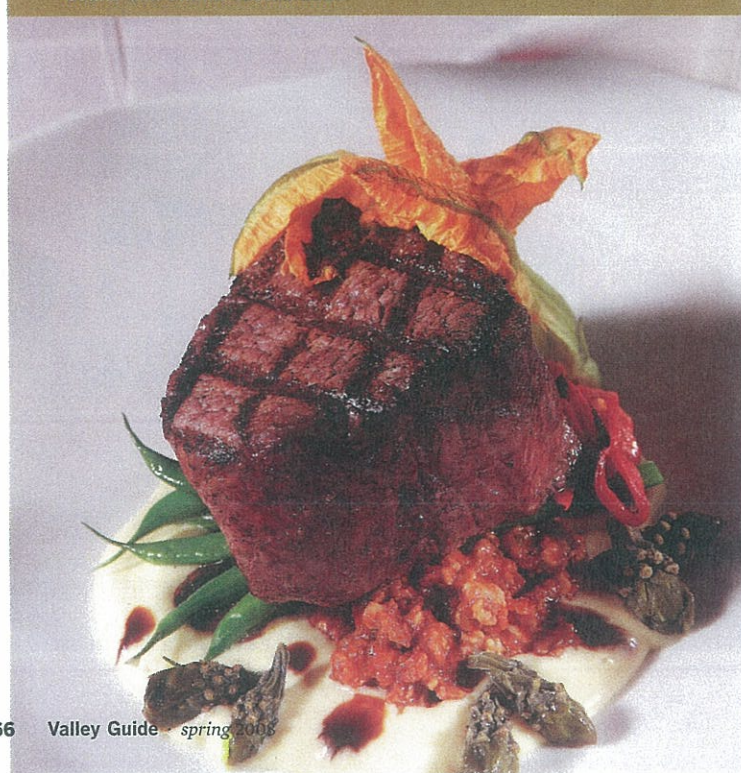
THESE TWO MASTERS COOK UP IMAGINATIVE COMBINATIONS WITH POWERHOUSE PRESENTATIONS.

The contemporary decor of the circular-shaped dining room is understated, with a medley of monochromatic tones. On the walls, bold Native American textiles add rich red hues and an authentic Southwestern flair. Couples sit cozily at double-linen-draped, widely spaced tables spotlighted by votive candles.

↓ Dine alongside a breathtaking mountain view at Kai Restaurant.



↓ Kai's tenderloin of grass-fed buffalo arrives atop scarlet runner beans and cholla-cactus buds.



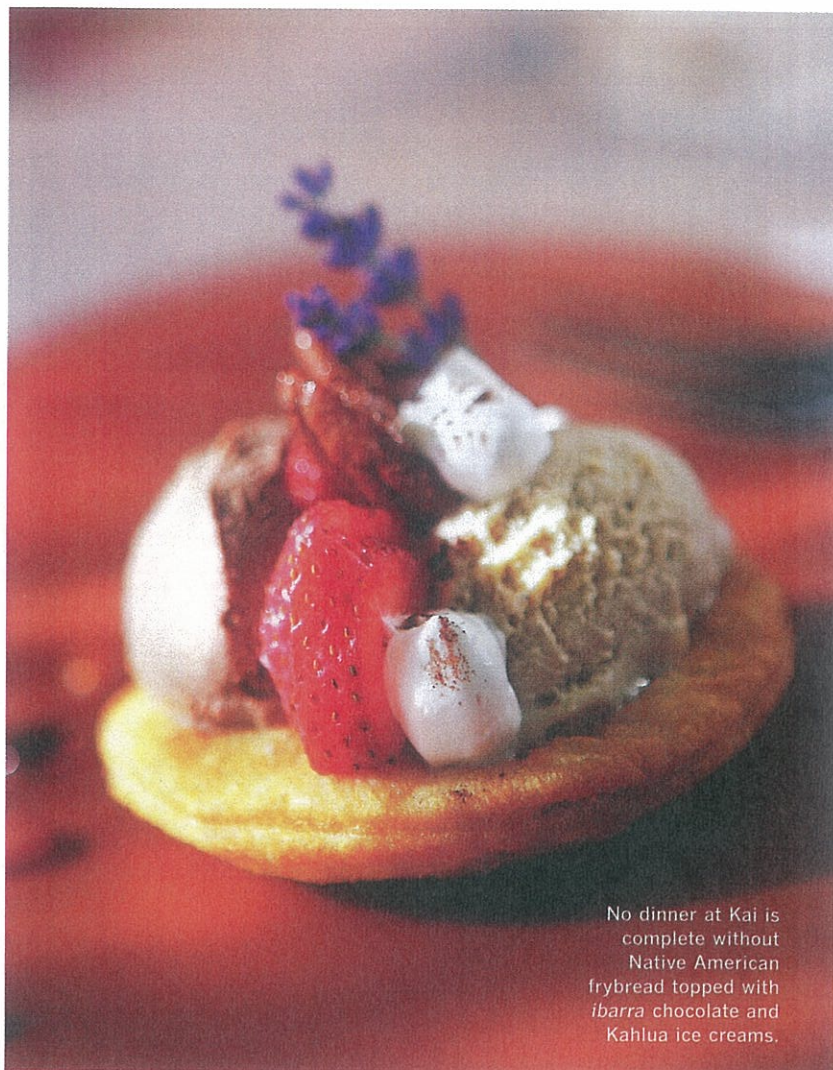
Looking for a more LAID-BACK SPOT?

If you like an organic meal in a more casual atmosphere, try **Mandala Tea Room**, where guests can visit the on-site art gallery and all-natural spa before sitting down to a vast variety of organic teas and delights from the organic, vegetarian, and dairy- and egg-free kitchen. You'll enjoy starters (such as tempeh lettuce wraps or tea crumpets), fresh salads, all-raw food options, sandwiches, entrées, and a daily rotation of fresh desserts that have a devoted local following.

For another casual dining experience, visit **The Center Bistro**, an organic bistro/yoga studio serving fresh-bread sandwiches (including wild salmon and free-range chicken), salads (such as Artichoke Caesar and Citrus Spinach), organic fruit smoothies, and organic wine and beer. Visitors also sip organic teas and coffees and indulge in desserts "to live for," including Raspberry Cheeseless Cake and chocolate mousse with seasonal fruits.

The Center Bistro 21 E. 6th St., Tempe,
480-491-5591, www.iamthecenter.com

Mandala Tea Room 7027 E. 5th Ave.,
Scottsdale, 480-423-3411,
www.mandalatearoom.com



No dinner at Kai is complete without Native American frybread topped with ibarra chocolate and Kahlua ice creams.

A breathtaking view (the grand Sierra Estrella Mountains to the northwest and South Mountain to the northeast) greets guests at **Kai Restaurant** at the Sheraton Wild Horse Pass Resort & Spa, located on 2,400 acres of the Gila River Indian Reservation. Native American Chef de Cuisine Jack Strong and Executive Chef Michael O'Dowd (with the consultation of James Beard Award-winning Chef Janos Wilder) have created an innovative menu inspired by the culture and cuisine of Pima and Maricopa tribes, as well as farmed ingredients from the local Indian community.

Hold your wild horses, you're in for an unforgettable experience—not only an outstanding meal at this AAA-rated Five-diamond dining spot, but top-flight service that morphs dinner into a kind of performance art. Servers appear and disappear in a choreographed dance, whisking away your last course in swift unison, only to bring the next delectable course.

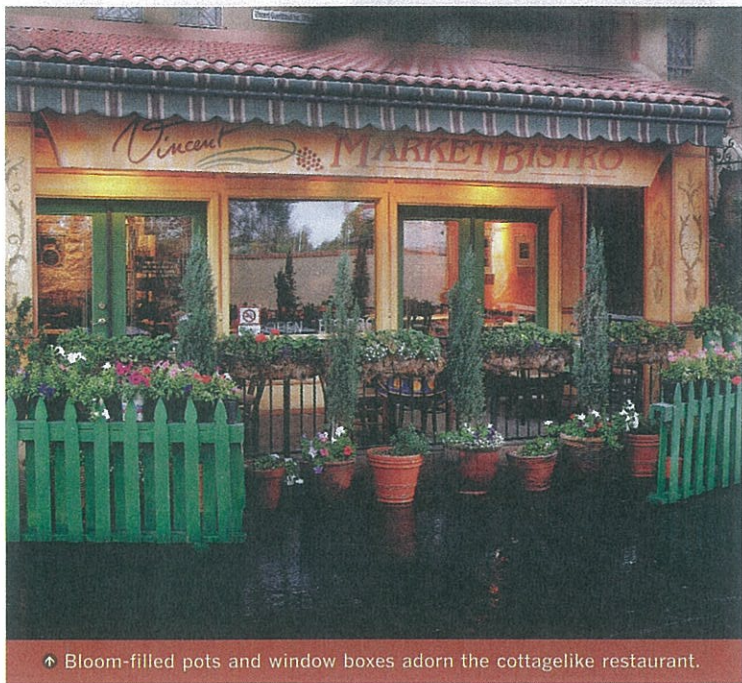
Dishes, created from indigenous ingredients, reflect ancient culture and tradition, so storytelling is part of the show. I was persuaded by our server's anecdotal account of a signature entrée, grass-fed buffalo (which

resembled the tenderness of filet mignon), presented atop scarlet runner beans and cholla cactus buds from the Sonoran Desert (handpicked after the first monsoon rain of the year) and drizzled with saguaro syrup, also farmed locally. These unique ingredients comprise a host of delicate flavors, with no one taste overriding another. A salad of tiny greens, picked from the gardens of an agricultural project for the children of Gila Crossing School, is accented with heirloom tomatoes, topped with goat cheese, and splashed with blood-orange vinaigrette. The sweet slow-braised and garlic-buttered lobster tail appetizer—with salsa and creamy avocado mousse—warrants a high recommendation. Aromatic, baked-on-the-premises Native breads, as well as fruit and nut breads are perfect for soaking up savory juices. Desserts, listed on menus hand-painted by Native artists, include the popular frybread with ibarra chocolate and Kahlua ice creams. The impeccable service and pampering follow you to your valeted car, where I found a parting gift of designer water, Kai signature chocolates, and a personalized note of gratitude from the staff.

SERVS
APPEAR AND
DISAPPEAR IN
A CHOREO-
GRAPHED
DANCE,
WHISKING
AWAY YOUR
LAST COURSE
IN SWIFT
UNISON.



↑ Cozy tables welcome diners to Vincent Market Bistro.



↑ Bloom-filled pots and window boxes adorn the cottagelike restaurant.

THIS IS SIT-BACK- AND-RELAX COMFORT FOOD.

At **Rancho Pinot**, you'll discover how Chef Chrysa Robertson has made this restaurant a favorite of locals as well as a must-try for savvy tourists. Start with one of their signature appetizers, Crispy Stuffed Squash Blossoms. Filled with goat and ricotta cheeses and topped with herbs and a cherry tomato dressing, you'll savor bursts of sweet-then-tart flavors under a crunchy breadcrumb crust. If you're a shrimp lover, try them large and tender over the Thai-style coleslaw (a spicy wonder), complemented by sweet mango relish.

While nearly all produce is organic and purchased directly from local farms, Chef Robertson buys meat and fish from favored purveyors worldwide. An old-fashioned wood oven and charcoal mesquite grill cooks up braised Heritage pork, lamb chops, and flat-iron steaks (a customer favorite—mesquite-grilled and sliced over locally farmed veggies). This is sit-back-and-relax comfort food, and the decor—open and spacious, elegant but unpretentious—makes a fitting backdrop. Lamps created with images of kitschy Western postcards spotlight retro wall art, such as illustrations of cowgirls on

horses at the rodeo. Here's a dining spot that's sophisticated enough to have a sense of humor about Arizona's cowboy culture. Cooking for her clients with seasonally fresh and organic ingredients for 15 years, Chef Robertson is credited as a local trailblazer now that the "go green" stampede is on. Don't go without indulging in dessert—the peach crisp, made with peaches harvested from Aravaipa Canyon in Southern Arizona, under melting vanilla-bean ice cream, creates a fine finale.

THE FUSION OF CLASSIC FRENCH AND SOUTHWESTERN CUISINE CREATES A HEAVENLY MIX OF TEXTURE AND TASTE.

If you're looking for a tucked-away bistro that in-the-know foodies frequent, visit **Vincent Market Bistro**, where guests eat mostly organic fare on a charming, oh-so-French terrace, adorned with potted pansies and geraniums, or inside the cottage-style restaurant. Owner and chef Vincent Guerithault, who trained in France, worked at Maxim's and Fauchon in Paris, and launched his acclaimed main restaurant (Vincent on Camelback) 22 years ago, has added this cozy bistro behind the restaurant—a more casual place to enjoy his unique blend of French cooking and Southwestern ingredients that has earned him many prestigious honors, including James Beard's America's Best Chef: Southwest Award and *Zagat's* Best in Area.

After enjoying warm, buttery croissants, I began with a signature appetizer—the smoked-salmon quesadilla, nicely spiced with fresh dill and horseradish cream. The fusion of classic French and Southwestern cuisine creates a heavenly mix of texture and taste. Or try the light *pissaladiere*—a caramelized-onion tart served with organic greens glistening under red-wine vinaigrette.

Daily specials alternate and include rosemary-roasted free-range chicken (in a mushroom gravy) with *gratin dauphinois* (rich with garlic); the seafood skewer (shrimp, scallops, and salmon) with sautéed spinach; or the French country-style grilled pork chop with mashed potatoes—a thick, tender, fragrantly spiced chop with some of the best potatoes you'll ever eat. Or try a favorite: the signature coq au vin—free-range chicken in a fragrant sauce of red wine, mushrooms, and onions, with a side of those delicious mashed potatoes. Lighter fare is also available, including a seasonal and organic vegetable medley atop a bed of organic mixed greens.

Even if too full for dessert (never say never), guests receive a complimentary treat, which varies daily—options can include a fluffy chocolate mousse or flavorful sorbet served in chilled, elegant stemware. This lovely last touch encompasses the restaurant's homey appeal—here's a place that makes you feel welcome and content.

Tempe-based freelance writer Amy Abrams is an organic food fan, arts writer, and frequent contributor to Valley Guide.



Complimentary
desserts change
daily at Vincent
Market Bistro.

"I love organic"
RESTAURANT GUIDE

Kai Restaurant at Wild Horse Pass Resort & Spa,
5594 W. Wild Horse Pass Blvd., Chandler, 602-225-0100,
www.wildhorsepassresort.com

The Latilla at The Boulders Resort and Golden Door Spa,
34631 N. Tom Darlington Dr., Carefree, 480-488-7316,
www.theboulders.com

Rancho Pinot 6208 N. Scottsdale Rd., Scottsdale, 480-367-8030,
www.azeats.com/ranchopinot

Taggia at FireSky Resort & Spa, 4925 N. Scottsdale Rd.,
Scottsdale, 480-424-6095, www.taggiascottsdale.com

Vincent Market Bistro 3930 E. Camelback Rd., Phoenix,
602-224-3727, www.vincentsoncamelback.com 