



Potato-crusted trout at Restaurant Kelly Liken in Vail

dish fulfillment }

The Vail Valley has earned a reputation for food as tantalizing as its snow—but with nary a drought in sight. It's hard to go wrong at any valley venue, but should you have limited time to sample the fare, we tackled the gargantuan task of eating as many meals as possible to narrow the list to a handful of dishes that simply can't miss. You're welcome. Now tuck in.

STORY BY DEVON O'NEIL PHOTOS BY STUART MULLENBERG

in the beginning... }

Appetizers are like leadoff batters: good ones set the table for the power hitters. But that doesn't mean they can't be stars themselves, as ambitious local chefs remind us every day with these classic-to-creative plates.

Maryland Crab Cake *The Gashouse, Edwards*

If you've been to the Gashouse, you know about this crab cake. If you haven't, maybe you've heard anyway. It looks like it's on crab-cake steroids, for starters. And it tastes like they do on the Chesapeake Bay, where the most classic recipes always seem to let the jumbo lump meat shine on its own.

Calamari *Ti Amo, Eagle-Vail*

Tucked away in a one-story business complex in Eagle-Vail, Ti Amo has long been a locals' hideout known for its mouthwatering calamari. It's a well-earned reputation. Paper-thin fried spinach leaves lighten the dish overall, allowing the squid and a chunky homemade marinara to fully express their hearty selves.



⬆️ **Fried Goat Cheese** *Vin48, Avon*

First, a disclaimer: I would eat goat cheese if it were buried in a mud trough. I cannot get enough of it. But no goat cheese has ever lit up my taste buds quite like Vin48's version. Fried to the perfect softness and served warm over thinly sliced beets, it's topped with arugula drizzled in an orange truffle vinaigrette. The whole dish is as good as cheese gets.

Lobster Bisque >> *La Tour, Vail*

A lot of people like a lot of things at La Tour, for good reason. The lobster bisque is a big fish in this already big pond. It's rare for a restaurant to bring in live Maine lobsters for its bisque, then actually leave hunks of tail and claw meat bobbing in the bowl, as La Tour does. The only problem? One bowl will leave you wanting two.

Arugula and Date Salad *Terra Bistro, Vail*

This salad aligns with Terra Bistro's organic feel: fresh, creative, healthy, and aesthetically inclined. A carefully built helmet of arugula camouflages a medley of dates, walnuts, and, yes, goat cheese. The pomegranate syrup and shallot vinaigrette work together to make the salad sing.





fill me up }

Playing outside in the Rocky Mountains makes people hungry—really hungry. Luckily, there is a way to treat that here.

« Wiener Schnitzel Pepi's, Vail

The fact that an Austrian named Helmut makes this schnitzel automatically elevates its legitimacy. So does the fact that it comes from Pepi's, a Bridge Street institution if ever there were one. The veal itself is a healthy, well-seasoned portion. But it also plays a sentimental role, in addition to filling stomachs with good food, and there's something to be said about that in this valley.

» Big-Eyed Tuna Medallions Montauk, Lionshead

It's rare to find a seafood dish—top-grade tuna overnighed from Honolulu, no less—that can fill you up like these famous big-eyed tuna medallions. Delicately cooked to preserve their tenderness, the medallions are piled over a large bed of zesty ginger-soy stir-fry with rock shrimp. The dish is so popular, says one server, that it's not uncommon for a six-top to come in and order six of them. "I think people



would throw rocks at the windows if we ever took it off the menu," he says.

Lamb Shank Vista at Arrowhead, Arrowhead/Beaver Creek

A lot of Vail Valley restaurants make a good lamb, which is a tribute to both the

meat and the world-class chefs who live here. But there's something about Vista at Arrowhead's preparation that produces a superlative succulence in this large hind shank, which becomes a 14-ounce piece of meat by the time chef-owner Michael Glennon's four-stage,

thirteen-hour cooking process is complete. It's available only from November to April, so carpe diem rules apply.

Braised Short Rib Up the Creek, Vail

Tender enough that you can leave the knife on the table, this short rib is as beloved for its own qualities as

for the unfathomably rich bacon-smoked gouda mac and cheese it rests upon. As I sit here writing, it's been three days since I consumed that mac and cheese, but my mouth is watering just picturing it—no joke. You can dip the short rib in a veal demi-glace straight from sauce heaven.

tried & true}

In a place with as much dining depth as the Vail Valley, it takes a special dish to attain celebrity status. The one common denominator, it turns out, is otherworldly taste. Trust us on these ones.

Veal Scallopini *Juniper, Edwards* >>

Among the many factors that separate good veal dishes from not-good veal dishes is portion size. Juniper does it right with its renowned scallopini. The process starts by pounding thin a huge slab of veal, then cooking it to a delectable tenderness on a flat top, and finally serving it over angel hair pasta with plump tomatoes, thick asparagus, chunks of mozzarella, and capers. It's a seriously stimulating plate of food.

Pacific Rim Halibut *Billy's Island Grill, Lionshead*

To make his signature dish—one of the most famous in the Vail Valley—owner Billy Suarez starts with a lightly blackened, 8-ounce piece of halibut over nearly-as-famous wasabi mashed potatoes. “So, right away you're kinda kicking butt,” he says. But a lot of chefs make good halibut; what sets this one apart is a marvelous chile dipping glaze that surrounds the outside of the plate.

Frutti di Mare *Campo de Fiori, Vail*

The grilled seafood salad has been the star of Campo de Fiori's menu since the restaurant opened

fourteen years ago. It's not complicated, just smart, fresh, and authentically Mediterranean. A medley of shrimp, clams, scallops, mussels, and squid is thrown on the grill with a dash of salt and pepper, quickly browned, then served warm over mixed organic greens and tossed in a citrus olive oil.

North Sea Dover Sole *Mirabelle, Beaver Creek*

Twenty years ago, Belgian chef-owner Daniel Joly began importing Dover sole from Holland to the Vail Valley, inspiring a wave of followers along the way. He still doesn't try to overprepare the “noble” meat, which remains the most

popular plate here. Lightly pan-seared, the sole is served with a potato crust and baby spinach, then topped with citrus jus that threatens to melt your taste buds.

Steak Diane *Russell's, Vail*

Few dishes bring as many gushing comments as Russell's Steak Diane, served just on the other side of the covered bridge in Vail. One of the best comes from a mother of two, who says: “I've licked my plate after eating one.” It's an 8-ounce, center-cut dry filet served over a tantalizing brandy cream sauce and complemented by scalloped potatoes layered with eggs and cheese. The recipe hasn't changed for twenty years.



up & coming

🦞 **SEAFOOD CEVICHE** *CIMA, AVON*

When famed chef Richard Sandoval opened Cima in Avon, he created a Latin kitchen with some New Age takes on traditional dishes. Exhibit A: the seafood ceviche, which is served with an *aji panca* paste to add a sweet, fruity flavor to the squid, shrimp, diced Spanish octopus, scallops, and bonito flake that constitute the meat of the dish. Bonus: you get a cupful of plantain and yucca chips to scoop the seafood from the aji.

🍔 **WILD GAME BURGER** *BULLY RANCH, VAIL*

Recently arrived executive chef Steve Topple has added a new classic to the locally adored Bully menu with this combined buffalo-elk burger. The thick, juicy meat is topped with a red-pepper aioli, pepper-jack cheese, and a napa cabbage slaw that includes carrots and red onions, giving the entire towering creation a fresh, zesty zing. It won't be long before word gets out among the Bully's loyal après crowd.





creative license }

Let's be honest—nobody likes the same old everything, least of all chefs. And their affinity for fresh creations has always been to our benefit.

📍 **Rabbit Loin** *Splendido, Beaver Creek*

Although sometimes overshadowed by some of its renowned menu brethren, there's a reason Splendido's rabbit loin maintains its spot on the restaurant's roster. It's unique, for starters—you'll be hard-pressed to find a comparable dish even in a world-class dining area like the Vail Valley—but also delightfully flavorful and filling, with surprisingly large portion sizes. Best of all, the restaurant gets the über-tender meat from a farmer in Iowa who still doesn't own a computer.

Potato-Crusted Trout *Kelly Liken, Vail*

Depending upon your timing last year, you could have enjoyed this Snake River trout across the room from First Lady Michelle Obama or World Series champion Alex Rodriguez. But the attention to detail is even more impressive than the celebrity factor, highlighted by Liken's shaved-fingerling-potatoes-

as-scales ingenuity. The fish is served over a sweet medley of caramelized Brussels sprout leaves, golden raisins, toasted pecans, and brandied beurre blanc.

Bison Rib Eye *Flame, Vail*

When chef Jason Harrison left the Bellagio last year to take over at Flame, he brought his disdain for "boring" with him. It shows in this 12-ounce

buffalo rib eye, which is dry-aged for twenty-one days, then cooked to succulent tenderness at 1,800 degrees, sliced, and topped by a sort of rogue-peppercorn black pepper relish whose ingredients include fermented black beans. The result is a steak experience unlike any other you'll ever have.

Swiss Hot Dog *Swiss Hot Dog Co., Avon*

Few local eateries are as iconic as this family establishment, which was founded in 1967 and still serves only two things: Swiss hot dogs and chicken-noodle soup. The all-natural pork-and-beef dogs—heaven on a warm baguette—are topped with alfalfa sprouts and brown mustard and sprinkled with a curry powder of twenty-six herbs and spices. It's got the perfect bite for an everyman's masterpiece.

post piste

BUFFALO MOZZARELLA FLATBREAD *8100, BEAVER CREEK*

There may be no smarter way to end a Beaver Creek powder day than this: Huddling around a fire outside 8100 while nipping a hot drink and scarfing down this unique brand of pizza, which features roasted garlic, basil, smoked tomato jam (think sweeter and chunkier than traditional pizza sauce), and sliced buffalo mozzarella, drizzled with an aged balsamic reduction for a last burst of sweetness.

NICKY'S QUICKIE *NICKY'S QUICKIE, MINTURN*

I had a hard time believing a Greek gyro in a place like the Vail Valley could produce such a cult following as Nicky's Quickie was rumored to possess. So I tried a Quickie for myself; it took me one bite to believe. Thanks to a brilliant tzatziki sauce made with expensive crème fraîche and organic yogurt, as well as fresh field greens and white balsamic vinaigrette, chef-owner Stephen Porter is accurate when he says, "It's different from any gyro you've ever had." The Quickie's funky-bistro vibe in downtown Minturn perfectly suits this dish, which tastes even better after skiing the Minturn mile.

SNOW PIG PIZZA » *VENDETTA'S, VAIL*

Few dishes have played a greater role in Vail's skiing history than this meat-lover's pizza, which has been baked in the heart of Vail Village for as long as most ski-bum memories are capable of recalling. It's not the ingredients (Canadian bacon, pepperoni, and sausage) that set it apart so much as what the Snow Pig signifies: namely, face shots from first chair until your legs give out, followed by cold draft beers and deeply satisfying slices.





« **Chocolate Fondue** *Swiss Chalet, Vail*

The Swiss Chalet's European authenticity extends to its dessert fondue, which is a dish you save plenty of room for if you know what's good for your taste buds. The nougat dark and hazelnut chocolates combine with raspberries, bananas, and strawberries to make for a meal-topper that tastes rich, smooth, and healthy.

Valrhona Chocolate Soufflé *Larkspur, Vail*

When considering this pricey (\$18.50) but irresistible soufflé, it's important to understand that chocolate rises one level above obsession for Larkspur pastry chef Mark Metzger. "It's my thing," he says. He uses some of the most exquisite chocolate in the restaurant business to make this dish—a single-bean Manjari from Madagascar. The sizable, 9-ounce soufflé is served with an equally paralyzing hazelnut anglaise sauce.

Sticky Toffee Pudding Cake *Sweet Basil, Vail*

In the realm of famous desserts in Vail, this one probably still reigns as no. 1—and justifiably so. The English-style pudding cake is baked in an

individual tin and served warm with Myers's Rum toffee sauce and cool, thick whipped cream on top. Your highest expectations are still no match for the five minutes of utopia this preparation creates.

just desserts}

There should be laws against food tasting this good. Don't say we didn't warn you.



special treats}

» **Breakfast Buffet** *Ludwig's, Vail*

To locals, this buffet needs no introduction. It's a once-a-year treat for some; a routine indulgence for others; and a novelty discovered daily by guests of the

Sonnenalp hotel. To give you an idea of the buffet's world-class variety, here is what I had on a hungry January morning: homemade apricot and cherry danishes; perfectly crisped French toast; a made-to-order omelet with mushrooms,

tomatoes, spinach, and cheddar; ultra-plump raspberries, blackberries, blueberries, kiwi, and grapefruit; eggs benedict with salmon; cured Italian meats; spinach quiche; and a double espresso. Bring your big-boy appetite.

Saffron Pasta with Truffles *Left Bank, Vail*

Perhaps not as widely known among the masses as other dishes featured here, Left Bank's homemade saffron pasta with shaved white (September to

December) and black (December to March) truffles is nonetheless revered by those in the know. Chef-owner Jean-Michel Chelain grew up eating this meal in the French Alps, and he still imports all of his truffles from the Perigord region in France and Alba, Italy. The flavor is unlike anything else you'll taste, which is why it pays to stay in the loop on when it's available.

Elk Tenderloin *Game Creek, Vail*

Located high on Vail Mountain, Game Creek offers three-, four-, or five-course prix fixe meals to its guests (it's open to the public only for dinner), and it's no coincidence that the options all include the club's signature elk tenderloin entrée. Less gamey than some elk, the 3-ounce Rocky Mountain tenderloins (two per plate) are marinated in an achiote sauce infused with citrus and Worcestershire, then served with a rich, breaded block of poblano mac and cheese that's deep fried. 🍴

Make up an excuse; convince yourself it's OK. Everyone deserves to be king for a day.