



local flavor

SANTA FE - ALBUQUERQUE - TAOS

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NATIVE VOICES

+ Luminaria +

restaurant & patio

story by KATIE MEHRER

“Reconcepting.” It’s more than a face-lift: It’s new guts, a new philosophy, almost a new religion. Luminaria, the restaurant at Inn and Spa at the Loretto, has had just that, and we should all be so lucky.

A self-help book will get you a fine redecoration. A cookbook will get you a fine new menu. But for a re-conceptualization you need to call in a team of experts. Destination Hotels and Resorts (DH & R) has taken over ownership of the inn, spa, and restaurant. They hired project managers Blau and

Associates out of Las Vegas, Nevada, to do market research and then really rethink the restaurant, formerly named Baleen, in terms of what Santa Feans want and need.

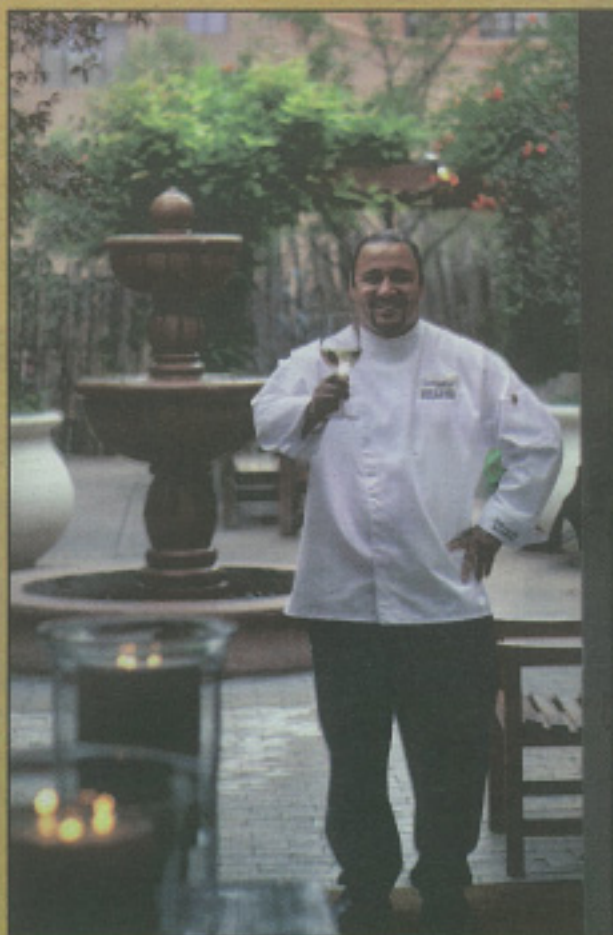
DH & R hired local design firm Bob Zimmer and Associates to redecorate, and then they hired a new team of chefs to revamp the menu. They intensively trained a team of waitstaff and cookstaff on the new food and the new attitude. A half-million-dollars and eight months later, Luminaria was born.

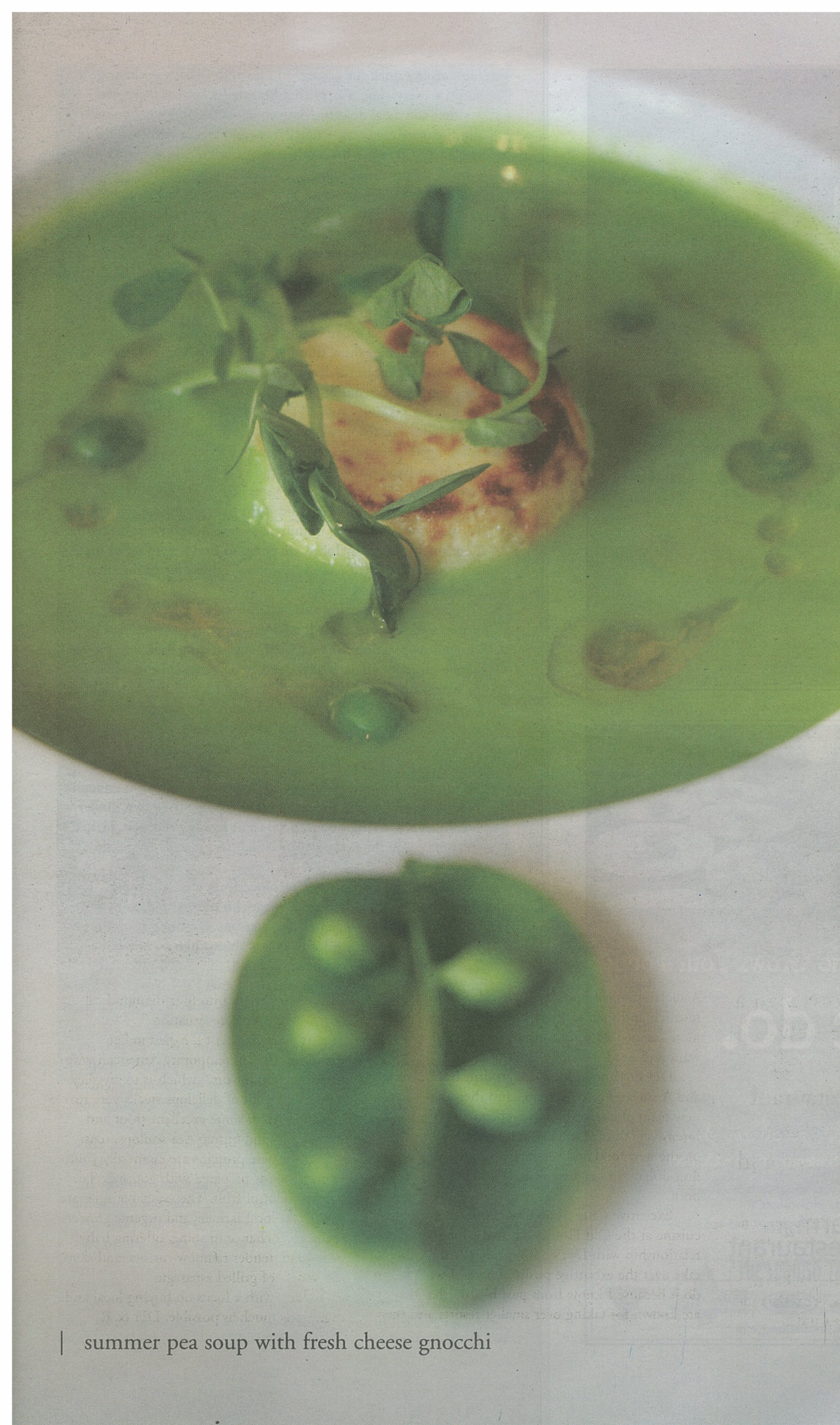
Executive Chef Brian Cooper, former chef de cuisine at the Old House, has had a long-standing relationship with DH & R. “They asked me to take over the executive position here...I was glad to do it because I know from past history that they are known for taking over smaller resorts and then

just turning them into four-diamond caliber. It was a no-lose situation.”

The new concept for the food at Luminaria is “contemporary American with Southwestern flavors,” which is to say they are serving a lot of delicious steaks very reasonably priced, some excellent trout and salmon, fat and buttery sea scallops, roast chicken. These proteins are essentially your comfort foods prepared with gourmet flair but not a lot of frills. The vegetable sides are where our local farmers and organic growers really get a chance to shine, offering baby beet salad, tender rainbow carrots, and slender shoots of grilled asparagus.

Along with a focus on buying local and organic as much as possible, DH & R





includes sustainability and giving back to the community among its core values. They reduce waste and recycle, use paper products made from post-consumer materials, and have enrolled in the “adopt a river” program, taking responsibility for the section of the Santa Fe River that is right across the street from their downtown location. Executive sous chef Malik Hammond notes, “They live their values. That’s one thing I’m very impressed with. They walk what they talk.”

Both chefs agree that the Southwestern influence is there in the new menu, but it’s not overpowering. They are not pushing it as much as some of the excellent Southwestern-themed restaurants in town. At Luminaria, the Southwestern flair emerges in the sage and pearl barley that is served with the trout, the lime and chipotle aioli in the crab cakes, and their signature smoky ancho rub for the steaks.

But the new menu is such a small part of the Luminaria concept. The notion now is that while this is a fine dining establishment it is also a hang-out place for locals where they can feel free to stroll in the evening wearing shorts or stop for a ten-dollar breakfast on the way to work in the morning.

The plates are designed for sharing, in the spirit of Spanish tapas, but not in such small sizes. The dinner menu offers six complete entrees but also gives you the option of steaks, pork chops, or fish dishes a la carte and numerous delightful sides, soups, salads, and appetizers to accompany them. The idea is—yes, you should pass them around among your friends. You should all have a taste. Food is designed to be shared and to promote togetherness.

Gone are the starched white linen tablecloths. Solid wooden tables of reclaimed barn wood give diners a more relaxed feeling. Freshly fried dessert doughnuts are served in a white paper bag, making you

| summer pea soup with fresh cheese gnocchi



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look inside, smell the aroma, and get that “what’s in the bag?” surprise every time. Pastry chef Megan Tucker has developed another convivial dessert: Mexican chocolate fondue. You will dip the marshmallows, strawberries, and local apricots in the hot chocolate sauce and if ever there was a lull in the dinner conversation it will surely be over.

Part of the extensive training for the Luminaria waiters is about learning to be informed, but not uptight. They aren’t butlers, they aren’t white-gloving it, but they can tell you exactly which ranch in Taos the beef is from and a few of the secrets of preparation—just enough to get your mouth watering. Randall Warder, one of the Blau and Associates re-concept people, tells them, “If the customer wants to talk about wine and food...that’s you! You’re on deck!” He encourages them to let their personalities shine through and to converse knowledgeably and honestly about the food. The servers even get the recipes so they can try them out at home. So every waiter is, potentially, a chef in the making.

Chef Brian Cooper explains why everyone is eager and excited about the new concept for Luminaria. “Let’s face it, this restaurant [when it was Baleen] didn’t have a good reputation for a while. We were known for high prices with snooty service. We want to get away from that and just be more approachable and be there for you.” With Luminaria’s ideal location embracing the Loretto chapel, many locals are going to find it wonderful that the romantic shaded patio is once again theirs for eating, mingling, drinking, and dating.

July’s grand opening gala, where locals were invited for drinks and tastes of every food on the menu, was preceded by enough preparation to make the moon landing look like a spur-of-the-moment affair. Waiters and cooks attended special classes, memorized ingredients, were quizzed and tested not only on the food but also on their teamwork skills. As the face of Luminaria, they learned to work with the kitchen in the spirit of teamwork, to encourage mingling and casual conversation among guests, to double check the food in case that pomegranate-seed garnish never made it to the plate, in case a new chef didn’t put enough blue-corn croutons in the Caesar. Then they served free dinners for three days to their own friends and family, who were invited to come enjoy the new ambiance and (let’s face it) be guinea pigs.

These dinners attracted everyone from excited couples dressed in shiny I-never-get-to-wear-this outfits to dads in work clothes to excited gaggles of teenagers in everything from dresses to jeans to dresses with jeans. It was almost like no one quite knew what to wear—without speaking, the crowd was asking, “Is this still a fancy place? Or is it more ‘Santa Fe?’” Now they know. It is quintessentially Santa Fe: wear jeans, with or without a sport coat.

The irony of Luminaria’s new concept is that it is really an old concept: back to basics. It is a concept that includes shopping for baby beets at the farmer’s market, welcoming neighbors with affordable prices, offering diners a sense of belonging, and giving back to the community.

If you are a Santa Fean and a foodie, then a gleaming place setting and impeccable service feel like your birthright, as do warm handshakes, cool evening breezes, and comfy clothes. In that case, the dappled shade of a patio that looks out on the historic Loretto Chapel is going to be your new favorite place to bring visitors and old friends, to explore new tastes, and to pass the plates around.

Luminaria is situated in the Inn and Spa at Loretto at 211 Old Santa Fe Trail in Santa Fe. 866.601.9588. www.lorettodining.com.



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