



While the Arid Club's lunch menu is "built for speed," it also has inventive features that rotate weekly, such as this Mediterranean angel hair pasta tossed with artichoke hearts, capers, sun-dried tomatoes, garlic and olive oil, and topped with snapper, feta and chive white truffle aioli.

A NEW CLASSIC

Inside the transformation of Boise's historic Arid Club

Wise men, old wives and recreational philosophers agree we should never mix business and pleasure. Yet that very mix is the foundation of one of Boise's oldest and grandest institutions. Soon to celebrate its 120th year, the Arid Club remains true to its roots, to the tradition of polite men and women forging bonds over good food, drink and conversation. From the Owyhee Plaza Hotel to One Capitol Center to its current location next to the Boise River, the private dining and social club always has been a place where members can relax and make connections, but 2008 was a transformative year.

'A WONDERFUL PLACE JUST TO COME AND RELAX'

The social club is an ancient concept, but one of its most iconic forms emerged in 17th century Europe, where men of substance gathered for professional advancement, political exchange and enjoyment of fine food and spirits. The practice spread to the Eastern United States, and transplants to Boise founded the Arid Club in 1890 —

the same year Idaho became a state — to carry on the tradition of personal and professional fellowship in an exclusive setting.

More than a century after its founding and 75 years after it became a nonprofit organization, the Arid Club remains exclusive, though policy states: "Any person, regardless of gender, race, color, religion, national origin or disability may become an Arid Club member," provided he or she is invited by an existing member in good standing, approved by the board of directors and able to afford the dues.

The current membership of about 400 includes distinguished men and women of many stripes. What they have in common is a special place to go for a card game with friends, an eye-popping magic show over cocktails, a smart business lunch or a five-course meal with family.

"There are so many benefits to membership," said George Iliff, managing principal for Colliers International Idaho and a six-year member of the Arid Club. "The club is a terrific place to entertain, to



Judi Kieffer



George Iliff

continued ▶

“To establish a club of business and professional men and women whose members are uniformly congenial with one another as nearly as may be, to provide them with an attractive and convenient meeting place, and to exclude there from bigots, propagandists, boosters, go-getters, uplifters, reformers, and snobs.”

— Arid Club preamble



ABOVE: The main dining room was built around a striking stone fireplace, a permanent element that works well with new draperies, wallpaper, custom carpet and fixtures.

LEFT: This before photo of the main dining room in the Arid Club shows the original cooler colors and affinity for brass.

BEFORE PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARID CLUB

General manager Alvin Charlton displays a bottle from the new wine wall in the Arid Club dining room. Designer Judi Kieffer created the piece to be a focal point, to separate work areas from the dining space and to bring attention to the club's expansive wine collection.



Chef Chris McDonald will be one of the featured chefs at the Boise Philharmonic's The Chef and The Gourmet Gala on March 6.

recipe → box

Elk Osso Bucco

FROM THE ARID CLUB KITCHEN & CHRIS MCDONALD. Serves 6.*

- 5 pounds Black Canyon Elk shank cut about 2 inches thick
- 2 onions, rough chopped
- 2 stalks celery, rough chopped
- 1 large carrot, rough chopped
- 1 tablespoon garlic, minced
- Bottle of port (for the sauce and to moisten fruit)
- Box of low-sodium beef broth
- 4 bay leaves
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Assorted dried fruit (to be steeped beforehand in port and beef broth)
- All-purpose flour
- Butter or oil

Preheat oven to 325 degrees. Season the cut shanks; roll in flour. Brown the shanks in butter or oil over a medium-high heat. Place shanks in a deep roasting pan with carrots, onions, celery, bay leaves, garlic, port, beef broth and some water. The liquid in the pan should almost cover the shanks. After the port, use half broth and half water to fill pan to appropriate level. Bake at 325 degrees, covered. Turn the shanks every hour and check to see if they are tender by piercing them with a toothpick or meat fork. They should take 3 to 4 hours to cook. When done, transfer the shanks to a serving platter. Strain the liquid they were cooked in into a large saucepan. Remove fat floating on the surface with a ladle. Add the refreshed fruit to the liquid and bring to a light boil. Reduce to a desirable flavor and consistency or season and thicken with some cornstarch dissolved in cold water. Spoon the finished sauce over the cooked shanks and eat with risotto, potatoes or dumplings.

* Recipe quantities are flexible, but use at least one cup of dried fruit, and at least a quart of beef broth or stock. The size of the chopped garlic and veggies isn't important, as they will be strained out of the liquid.

interact with other members, have meetings — it's a wonderful place just to come and relax. Frankly, my wife and I would rather go to the club for dinner than most any other restaurant in town."

MAC THE KNIFE

While the Arid Club's reputation was built on signature cuisine, members relied on catering until 1979. That is when Gerhardt Schroeder became the club's first executive chef, and some of the dishes he created during his 20-year tenure remain favorites. His successor, Alvin Charlton, moved from managing the kitchen to managing the entire club in 2007, leaving his own indelible marks on the menu. A lasting replacement wasn't easy to find, but Chris McDonald (aka "Chef Mac") has been handling the back of the house for almost a year.

McDonald grew up on a 60-acre California farm in the foothills between Sacramento and Lake Tahoe, eating what he called, "homemade, middle-class American fusion." The only exceptions were his father's special recipe cow tongue, catfish or frog legs with lots of oregano, red wine vinegar and garlic. McDonald wasn't drawn to any particular subject in high school, but an insightful guidance counselor helped him land a culinary apprenticeship that changed his life.

"It was the most fortuitous thing that ever happened to me," McDonald said. "I took to it like a fish to water."

He started out washing dishes and worked his way up to prep cook, sous chef and executive chef positions at Valley fine dining establishments, including Crane Creek Country Club, 43 North and Desert Sage. In between Crane Creek and 43 North, he cooked on the line at the Arid Club, a position he took a pay cut and a professional step back for just to work with Charlton.

"You don't need to read recipes; you need to understand food," McDonald said, crediting Charlton with helping him gain that understanding. "You need to constantly increase your senses and develop your craft."

AMUSE BOUCHE

While McDonald eventually moved on in order to develop his craft and resume, he kept his eye on the club and jumped at the

chance to come back, this time as executive chef. He took over his favorite kitchen last spring, and while it hasn't changed much since it was built from Schroeder's design in 1984, McDonald said it is better equipped than any other kitchen he's seen in the Treasure Valley.

"The kitchen is set up to where you have no excuses," he said.

The same could be said for the dinner menu. For decades it was two pages of traditional starters, salads and entrees, mostly because the members expect staples such as escargot with Pernod and garlic butter, and lamb shank with mashed potatoes and stone-cracked mustard sauce. While McDonald enjoys experimenting with flavor profiles and presentation, he does his best to honor such "Arid Club Classics."

"Mostly, I bring a fresh set of eyes. I always try to push that everything has to be deliberate — nothing finds its way onto

the plate by accident," McDonald said. "We're craftsmen, and our craftsmanship is going to show on every plate that comes out of the kitchen."

Also coming out of the kitchen are items on the new "Featured Fare" page, which changes every two weeks. In January, it included sea scallops au gratin with pancetta, asiago cream and pommes Anna; Black Canyon Elk osso bucco with port, dried-fruit glaze and squash risotto; and baked Alaskan king salmon with filo and parmesan crust, smoked lemon cream and saffron rice. Such interpretive dishes

round out the tastes of the diversifying membership, but McDonald said balance is key.

"When I write menus I always look for Alvin's input. He gives me a lot of freedom to do things he would never do, which shows a ton of confidence," McDonald said. "You want to make positive changes that are subtle and permanent, not just the flavor of the week."

While McDonald's name is the only one on the menu, he depends on a dedicated crew anchored by veteran sous chef David Nalivka and pastry chef Chris Zahn.

"I get credit for a lot of people's hard work. It's always a collaborative effort," McDonald said. "You're always trying to find a job where you have the freedom to express your craft, security for yourself and

to learn more

Arid Club, 1137 River St., Boise, 343-4631, www.aridclub.org

Kieffer Design Group, 1517 Main St., Boise, 344-2680, www.kiefferdesigngroup.com



The beauty is in the details. Every table is set with crisp linens, sparkling flatware and the Arid Club's signature china.



Founded in 1890 and sanctioned as a non-profit organization in 1934, the Arid Club is a historic Boise institution. Some of the most prominent Idahoans of the last century have been part of the private dining and social club, which once was housed in the Owyhee Plaza Hotel. The current clubhouse was built in 1984, and the interior changed little until recently, when Kieffer Design Group was brought in to execute an update.

your family and a pleasant environment with like-minded professionals where you enjoy working every day. The Arid Club is that for me.”

TIMEWORN TO TIMELESS

While McDonald was bringing fresh perspective to the food, similar plans were being made for the atmosphere. Although well maintained, the club’s brass fixtures, dark carpet and furniture were beginning to show their age, not to mention their era.

“It was just time to update, upgrade and renew,” said Iliff, chairman of the club’s house committee and a member of the board of directors. “There was some sentiment to keep things the same in terms of the uses of the club and the style and feel. That’s why the committee includes longstanding and new members, former presidents, card room regulars — we got the full flavor of the interests of the membership.”

They also got inspiration from the four design companies they interviewed, involving presentations of full concepts down to individual fabric swatches. In the end, it was Kieffer Design Group that most impressed. The Boise-based firm has provided design and planning services nationally for more than 18 years, specializing in hospitality, restaurant and custom residential projects for clients ranging from Hilton Hotels to Tamarack Resort.

“For decades, the Arid Club has been an icon in our community, and we are thrilled we were able to update this historic piece of Boise,” principal designer Judi Kieffer said. “It was a very positive experience, and we worked with a great group of board members who shared their time and ideas to pull this project of design and budget together that would be



Rather than render the club unrecognizable in the redesign, Kieffer Design Group enhanced what still worked, like the brass handles on the card-room doors. Once shiny, they were powder-coated to a softer bronze.

the voice of the membership at large.”

That voice spoke loudly about changing the feel from cool to warm, starting with an infusion of color. The layering of paprika, caramel, mossy green and charcoal suggests rich but classic styling in everything from damask draperies to landscape photographs by Boisean Mark Lisk and paintings by local artist Venture Coy. Brass chandeliers gave way to modern clusters of light, and other brass fixtures were softened with bronze powder coating. The more than 20-year-old blue carpet was replaced with a custom patterned one that plays well against the robust colors and textures of transitional furniture and fresh flowers.

To make the most of available space, Kieffer Design Group transformed two under-utilized closets. One became a wine locker where members can store their

favorite vintages. The other became a stylish, private conversation room.

The feature Kieffer is most proud of is the wine wall in the main dining room. She designed it to be a focal point, to separate work areas from the dining space and to create more storage for the club’s expansive wine collection.

“Judi Kieffer and her contractors, suppliers and subs really did an outstanding job. Generally, we feel we really preserved the flavor and feel and tradition of the club while making it more comfortable and usable,” Iliff said, adding that the change from solid to glass-paneled entry doors is significant. “As you approach, you see all that is being offered. We wanted the first impression to be one of lights and warmth and welcoming.”

UNIFORMLY CONGENIAL

Arid Club members may like their filet mignon cooked differently, some preferring medium rare with tamarind peppercorn sauce, and some well done with béarnaise. Some may seek out the old wingbacks in the upstairs breezeway, while others embrace the new couches in the downstairs lounge. Whatever their tastes, they are part of something that is at once exclusive and easily relatable — the pleasure of a good meal and good company. And with every guest they bring through the glass-paneled doors, they honor the words of their preamble, which, unlike the decor, will never go out of style. ☛



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