

A Berry Good Day

It started with a Kir Royale, and a lush cheese and fruit platter. It ended with a three-course lunch paired with wines. In between the two were sweet and savory tastes, sips and bites prepared by a large culinary contingent.



The site of all this decadent fun? Spencer's in the Hilton Orlando where Chef John O'Leary, Chef Eric Szymczak and restaurant manager Don Brookshire hosted a cooking demonstration that was filled with information, anecdotes, techniques and ideas — all based on the berry. Once a month the lunch and learn focuses on a seasonal or singular food (the session the month before this had been on asparagus).

First up, as soon as we were seated in front of the open kitchen, a review and tasting of different berries from blackberries to huckleberries, wild strawberries to juniper berries. As the chefs began to stir, whirl and mix, guests were served a pear-berry lemonade with fresh blueberries.

One by one berry-inspired dishes were created and served. Light, crispy waffles with a macerated berry compote. Summer berry ice cream float. Blueberry smoothies. Raspberry corn muffins. Strawberry pizza with almond cream. Seared tuna with grape vodka buttermilk froth. New York strip with a juniper blackberry reduction. Pork belly with a huckleberry cider glaze. Chilled wild berry soup. And finally... Nitro raspberry-chambord sorbet.

Each was a wonderful combination of flavors and textures, with the berries adding a sweet, summery touch. As we exited our stools, a fresh new concoction was waiting for us. The brightly colored strawberry basil gimlets were enjoyed while we took a break and chatted.

Next we sat at a long table for the much-anticipated lunch (although we were not really hungry after all the sampling). The first course was a light, dreamy strawberry soup with Chantilly paired with Mosella Kabinett Feinherb Riesling.

The main course was huckleberry glazed saddle of lamb with carrot puree and cucumber-chevre gremolata, and it was served with Rosenblum Cellars Zinfandel. The red wine was an excellent choice as it brought out the flavors of the mild lamb without the heaviness of some reds. Again, it was a perfect summer combination.

To finish, dessert was an almost-too-pretty-to-eat selection of chocolate pistachio cake, macerated berries, raspberry sorbet and cream filled cones. What a wonderful way to spend a Saturday afternoon.

Spencer's is an open, yet elegant, space well suited to more formal dining without the stuffiness. There is a temperature controlled wine room visible from the main dining area and another private room for special occasions or meetings. Floor to ceiling windows let in lots of light and views of the resort's pool area below.



The Hilton Orlando, although located adjacent to the convention center, is clearly catering to the local residents through these thoroughly enjoyable culinary adventures. The resort also has a full service spa and other amenities that make it an ideal no-drive getaway.

— Christi Ashby

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Strawberry Basil Gimlet

- 3 Leaves fresh basil
- 1 1/2 Strawberries
- 1/2 Lime squeezed
- Dash of sweet and sour mix
- Splash of simple syrup
- 2 oz Gin
- Ice

Muddle basil, strawberries and lime juice in a shaker. Add sweet and sour mix, simple syrup, gin and a large handful of ice. Shake vigorously and strain into a chilled martini glass. Garnish with a strawberry, wedge of lime or basil leaf.

Berry Compote

- 1/2 Pint fresh raspberries
- 1/2 Pint fresh blueberries
- 1/2 Pint strawberries, hulled and quartered
- 1/2 Cup granulated sugar
- 2 Tablespoons frozen orange juice concentrate

In a saucepan simmer over medium heat; heat raspberries and blueberries, and simmer five minutes. Add the strawberries and simmer until they begin to soften (about three minutes). Add sugar and orange juice concentrate and simmer until sugar dissolves (about three more minutes). Chill one hour. Stir before serving.

Raspberry Corn Muffins

- 1 Cup fine corn meal or masa harina
- 1 Cup all purpose flour
- 6 Tablespoons sugar
- 1/2 Teaspoon salt
- 1/2 Teaspoon baking soda
- 2 Teaspoons baking powder
- 1 1/4 Cup buttermilk at room temperature
- 2 Eggs at room temperature
- 3 Tablespoons melted butter
- Zest of one lemon
- 1 Pint fresh, clean raspberries

Preheat oven to 400. Line a 12-muffin tin with cupcake papers or spray with non-stick spray. Combine the dry ingredients in a large bowl and whisk together. In a separate bowl whisk together the eggs, butter and buttermilk. Stir in the lemon zest. Add the berries and mix gently with a spatula until they are coated with flour. Pour in the buttermilk mixture all at once, and fold the wet and dry ingredients together until just blended. Fill each muffin cup with 1/2 cup batter.

Bake 18 – 20 minutes until golden brown and firm to the touch. Cool 10 minutes before removing from tin.

Serving suggestion: vanilla or honey butter