## Chef Matt Bimbaugh Brings Destination Dining Back to Cordillera by Laura Lieff



Pan-roasted Colorado lamb loin with caramelized fennel, apples, house-made lamb bacon, shaved golden beets, pearl onions, and date coulis.

S a new era at the Club at Cordillera as all things culinary are now under the direction of executive chef Matt Limbaugh. Hitting the ground running, Limbaugh literally and figuratively rearranged everything – from hiring new staff and creating a new menu to physically rearranging the kitchen and purchasing new equipment. Not surprising that a chef of Limbaugh's caliber, a former sous chef competitor on Iron Chef America, rose to the challenge of making the TimberHearth a first-class dining experience.

Although the TimberHearth marked Limbaugh's first opening as executive chef of a restaurant, he is no stranger to the fine-dining world. Hailing from Hendersonville, North Carolina, he attended Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte, North Carolina where he earned his degree in culinary arts and hotel restaurant management. Following culinary school, he was lead line cook at Pewter Rose, a Charlotte landmark restaurant, and at Bonterra's fine-dining restaurant, where he was promoted to sous chef. He moved to the Vail Valley in 2006 with another chef friend, Hunter Smith. Landing first at Beaver Creek's Mirabelle, Limbaugh quickly learned how to work as the only American in a kitchen full of French-speaking Europeans.

"Mirabelle was difficult at first because it was a strict kitchen, but it was also a good experience because I learned to uphold high standards no matter what," Limbaugh says. "While I was there I cooked all the proteins and got along great with everyone. The head chef and I clicked from the beginning."

His next endeavor was Kelly Liken in Vail where he started as sous chef and was promoted to chef de cuisine. Limbaugh describes the atmosphere as a "family environment" as he spent the majority of his time with coworkers during and after work and on days off. He also did a great deal of traveling with Liken including appearing as her sous chef on the popular culinary television show Iron Chef America in 2010. Liken also invited Smith to join as her sous chef on the show.

"Iron Chef America was exciting because I had never been on television before and there were so many cameras and fog machines and people running around Kitchen Stadium," Limbaugh says. "The actual cooking on the episode is strictly an hour but the episode in its entirety takes about six hours to complete."

While the pressure was definitely on to perform on television, Limbaugh remembers that he felt confident and was thrilled to be selected to cook on television with his best friend and then-boss.

"I was honored to be asked to do the show and would definitely do it again," he adds.

That kind of confidence and performance under pressure has helped Limbaugh with his current job as he is responsible for all things food at all three Club at Cordillera restaurants which include the TimberHearth, the Summit and Chaparral. He creates every menu



Seared scallops with creamy celery root, glazed local baby carrots, fresh opal basil and charred grapefruit emulsion.

for every restaurant and is in charge of the food concepts for each event held at the restaurants. Unlike many people in the Vail Valley, the summer season is the busiest for Limbaugh and winter is slower because only the TimberHearth is open year-round.

"My schedule is the complete opposite of what it was before because we were always slammed in the winter at my previous jobs," he says. "Having a busy summer and a milder winter has been an adjustment but I really love being part of Cordillera."

This summer (mid-June through mid-September) Limbaugh only took six days off as he was overseeing events and parties for anywhere from 60 to 400 people. In addition to the three restaurants, the Club at Cordillera also features a pool, two turn houses for golfers and a beverage cart, bringing the grand total of Limbaugh's scope of responsibility to seven summer food outlets. Additionally, all three restaurants hosted weddings, welcome parties, fundraisers, golf tournaments and birthday parties, among others. For one event this summer, Limbaugh created an "Around the World" theme which featured large tents that housed a variety of food and wine stations for many different countries.

"This summer was crazy but I have a very strong staff and my sous chef Rodrigo Gastelum does a great job," explains Limbaugh. "I've learned that you just have to stay ahead and be organized. I plan by the month, then two weeks out, then one week out and then

plan each day - I had three calendars going this summer!"

The winter season affords Limbaugh the opportunity to focus all of his time on the TimberHearth which is open for dinner Wednesday through Saturday, 5 to 9 p.m. He says that being open four nights a week allows for an entire day each week for prep which gives him more time for planning eclectic menus and finding and ordering the best seasonal ingredients available.

"We want to make the food even more creative than last year with more intricate dishes and more variety while still offering the favorites," he says. "Last year was a transition year so this year we are ready to hit the ground running."

Throughout the winter, TimberHearth guests can look forward to Colorado-centric items like lamb and elk, fresh seafood from Alaska, Boston and the Pacific Northwest and a variety of local vegetables from Eagle Springs Organic in Silt, Colorado.

"As always I will be focusing on the seasons while creating the winter menu. We'll warm the body with a couple of slow-braised items such as yeal cheeks and beef short ribs," Limbaugh says. "My team and I will again be turning out fresh house-made pasta and creating nightly appetizers and entrée specials, while bringing guests the freshest ingredients available for them to enjoy."

In addition to taste, Limbaugh emphasizes the importance of presentation.



Summer fruit "cobbler," stewed rhubarb, fresh berries, Colorado goat chèvre, brown butter and oat streusel. Buttermilk ice cream and strawberry powder.

"People eat with their eyes before they take their first bite," Limbaugh says. "I love walking through the dining room and seeing people take pictures of my food. I plate very delicately, almost as if it's a piece of art."

While cooking thoughtfully and creatively, he highly values utilizing the freshest ingredients possible. Although he prefers to buy local ingredients, what matters most to him is freshness regardless of the source.

"We bring in seafood from Alaska and Oregon that is so fresh it still smells like sea water when we get it," Limbaugh explains. "I order proteins like day-boat halibut and a variety of seafood specialties from Boston like scallops and it's always the freshest seafood possible."

When asked what sets the TimberHearth apart from other fine-dining establishments in the Vail Valley, Limbaugh says the picturesque setting and relaxing ambiance brings customers back again and again.

"Our customers come here to have a delicious meal without the hustle and bustle of tourists and parking issues in the villages of Beaver Creek and Vail," he says. "Our food has bolder flavors and more creativity. We don't take shortcuts here and everything we make is a labor of love."

At an elevation of 8,200 feet, TimberHearth's scenic location is

the definition of the ultimate destination dining experience. Guests can enjoy a horse-drawn sleigh ride through the blankets of snow and take in the views that can only be seen from Cordillera. Inside, the roaring fireplace is the ideal spot to warm up and unwind after spending time outdoors on a snowy day.

"We are very excited with Chef Matt and the amount of talent he has brought to Cordillera," says General Manager Mike Henritze. "We are very much looking forward to our second winter season with chef Matt at the helm."

In addition to the hard work and dedication from Limbaugh and his staff, Troon, the company that manages the property, continues to increase membership and guest satisfaction by offering exceptional service and extra events such as Thursday wine tastings from 4 to 6 p.m.

"Coming up to Cordillera every day and seeing these views is amazing and watching my cooks grow and learn new things are the best parts of this job," Limbaugh says. "Everyone here is so committed to doing well and it's very rewarding to see my staff working hard and the members happy. I really appreciate the dedication of the employees and am looking forward to showcasing our thoughtful and accommodating menu to our members and guests this season."

To make a reservation at TimberHearth call 970-926-5500.