

LOS GATOS

MAGAZINE

The Growing Season

By **LAURA NESS** | Published: MAY 17, 2015

As summer approaches, here are three great new culinary options.



NEW LOOK: Verge, at the Toll House, features a complete, contemporary redesign.

Verge: On The Way Up, Way Up

Seriously, you must check this place out. It was fun to watch some locals wander in on a Friday evening, wondering why the place didn't look familiar. That's a weird feeling, to walk into a destination you once knew, only to find it completely revamped. The changeover at Verge is evident in every respect, from the glassware to the tableware to the sconces and art on the walls. And the outdoor dining—so much more private and garden like. There are moveable walls filled with ornamentals, beneficials and herbs that get plucked daily for a dizzying array of cocktails the bar staff turns out using house-made syrups, salts, sugars and infused liquors.

There's a huge wooden highboy bar table for groups that want to hang out next to Cocktail Central, and a varied grouping of marble-top dining tables, with couch seating or chairs—you pick your comfort zone. The clever Verge logo appears discreetly on coasters and menus, and all the colors are muted and neutral, letting the natural materials shine.

Chef Albert Nguyen-Phuoc, whose resume includes stints at Dolce Hayes Mansion and Montgomery Hotel, was trained at Le Cordon Bleu in Paris. The exciting new menu reflects his commitment to creating fusion cuisine like you've never seen or tasted before. We just loved the asparagus and mustard green salad with egg yolk, radish, creamy dressing and beet soil. So much fun to turn the serving plate purple red as you scrape every last bit of that crunchy goodness off using what you might have left of your pre-dinner popover.

Yes, they serve fresh-baked popovers, in little paper bags, alongside some highly addictive whipped butter with whole dried red currants. Every mouthful is a trip back east for me, where popovers used to be a mainstay at fine dining restaurants and cafes alike. I once worked for a restaurant called Popovers while in college: you wouldn't believe how good they taste filled with chicken salad or ice cream with toffee sauce.



MEN IN BLACK: Michael Wilson, Toll House director of food and beverage, Verge restaurant manager Glen Shikora, and restaurant supervisor Shane Murray at Verge's grand opening.

But I digress. There's a bar menu with unbeatable selections like Pork Wings—hoisin infused pork ribs with such a fabulous glaze, you can't believe your fortune to learn that pigs can actually fly. And meatball sliders, which give you a taste of Italy in every bite, along with chorizo and chicken flatbread slathered with Manchego cheese, garlic and arugula. From the dinner menu, go with the wild mushroom cobbler, which will blow your mind with its surprise wakeup call of Humboldt Fog and parmesan.

The crispy Brussels sprouts with deviled egg, laved with pancetta, balsamic vinaigrette, lemon zest, Sriracha and radish will have you wanting to invite Albert over to cook dinner for you nightly. Seriously, I have never tasted anything like this. It could easily lose the pancetta and become a vegetarian's new favorite obsession.

Asian barbeque pork sliders with red shiso, cucumber, carrot and daikon are refreshingly light and go nicely with the Cucumber Mint cocktail, which combines blanco tequila with mint, Chartreuse and lime. Octopus and pork belly with black currant, Thai basil and Sriracha aioli will certainly appeal to those with more eclectic taste. A great dish to share is the onion dip with caviar, fresh dill, truffle oil and parmesan, served with house-made potato chips. Speaking of house-made, there's an entire line of pickles, jams, pickled beets—and logo'd growlers available for take home purchase.

Food and Beverage director Mike Wilson has a passion for craft beers, and he's got some beauties on draft as well as by the can, including a lovely summer-fresh Hell or High Watermelon Ale from 21st Amendment Brewery. There's a bacon and beer pairing menu that delivers up our favorite food group in duck, turkey and pig incarnations. So bring your appetite.



BITES: Verge Chef Albert Nguyen-Phuoc offers a menu of bar-friendly deliciousness.

Whether you choose the crispy buttermilk chicken, sautéed sea bass, braised lamb shank and loin, the hanger steak or the pork and duck burger, you should save room for the mango tapioca pudding which is like diving headfirst into a swimming hole on a tropical island.

Put this place on top of your “must” list. I almost forgot, they’re not open for lunch, but they are open for breakfast daily, and for brunch on Sunday. Intriguing breakfast items include gingerbread waffle, shrimp & grits with Andouille sausage, zucchini and faro cake with fried eggs and marble potatoes, and a Verge Omelette with mushroom, smoked duck, lardon and gruyere. Or, how about breakfast ravioli with brown butter, parmesan, pecan and poached egg?
vergerestaurant.com

Hult’s Now Open for Lunch

From Tuesday through Saturday, 11:30 to 2:30, you now have another choice for lunch in Los Gatos. Owner Alexander Hult welcomes you to indulge in his extensive and unique lunch menu, which includes favorites like brioche grilled ham and cheese with tomato bisque, chili chicken pasta salad, crusted seared Ahi salad, chipotle chicken wrap, duck panini, pulled pork sandwich with housemade BBQ sauce, and two burgers—a classic, and the Hult’s, which is a half pound of beef with apple-jalapeno sauce, bacon marmalade, frisee and pepper jack. Two extra bucks gets you an egg, too. Their sweet potato fries are truly sensational: crispy, thin and crunchy to the max.

Alex's Swedish heritage shines in two dishes from his homeland. Swedish meatballs are served over mashed potatoes with lingonberry jam, brown butter cream sauce, caramelized onions and pickles. The Swedish classic Pyttipanna is an amalgam of pork tenderloin, bacon, filet mignon, marble potatoes, cream, onion and pickled beets, topped with an over-easy egg. Other selections include a really fun organic veggie wrap with red quinoa, asparagus, zucchini, bell pepper and portobello mushrooms, and a filet pasta that combines pappardelle pasta, filet mignon, mushrooms, cherry tomatoes, cream, garlic and sage. The wine list is quite exciting, as is the wine rack that frames the interior wall from the gorgeous bar.



SWEDISH SURPRISE: Who knew that Pyttipanna, the national dish of Sweden, is so delicious? Alex Hult knew.

Bonus news: Alex plans to add an outdoor patio with low-backed couches and pillows for comfy seating, lots of plants and flowers and a wall of stacked slate to mirror the décor on the exterior walls and the reception area. He hopes to have the outdoor patio open by the middle of June.

The restaurant also serves brunch on Sundays. Thankfully, they have Billecart-Salmon Champagne on the menu. And Mumm Brut Prestige (\$40), too, if \$110 proves a bubbly budget-buster. hultsrestaurant.com

Gluten Free Gourmet in Saratoga

Mothers of gluten-intolerant kids, rejoice! You know have a fun place to take them in downtown Saratoga, where proprietor and baker Dana Hoppe turns out quite a splendid assortment of baked goods from her carefully created — and secret — recipes. Don't even ask her about them: It's her tradecraft. She uses fresh, organic ingredients and offers dairy-free, nut-free and vegan options, plus she will custom-create recipes for those with multiple food allergies or specific diets.

Highly popular are the cookies (Kitchen Sink 2.0, white chocolate and butterscotch), muffins, scones (cheddar and bacon) and breads. They serve lunch and snacks, complete with drinks, homemade soups and salads. A freezer is filled with gluten-free dinner items like raviolis and other pastas from sources like Feel Good Foods.

Even if you don't have a gluten allergy, Gluten Free Gourmet, located at 14510 Big Basin Way (former home of The Butter Paddle) is worth checking out. Says Dana: "We created our business for people with food allergies; we make our products delicious for everyone."

The bakery is open Tuesday-Thursday, 8:30am til 4:30pm, and Friday and Saturday, 8:30am to 7pm.