

HEALTH WISE

By Carrie Borzillo

Culinary Indulgence

Spa chefs revolutionize kitchen menus to offer refreshments that fuse flavor and art.

STEREOTYPICAL SPA CUISINE, SUCH AS SMOOTHIES, tofu salads or wheatgrass shots, has gone from yawn to yum in recent years. Today's fuller menus include anything from pizza and burgers to—believe it or not—a Russian beet soup known as borscht.

"These days, it's all about comfort foods made simple and healthy," says Wendy Bazilian, Ph.D., a registered dietitian and the nutrition specialist for Golden Door (goldendoor.com) in Escondido, California. She's also coauthor of *The SuperFoodsRx Diet* (Rodale, 2008). "Spa cuisine is gourmet food that's nutritional with fresh, healthy ingredients and whole grains. This isn't 'fat farm' food anymore."

Here's a look at how three spas elevate healthy food to sophisticated spa cuisine. They also offer advice for similar businesses seeking to do the same.

Voda Spa
West Hollywood, California
vodaspa.com

Open since: 2007

Popular dishes and drinks: Borscht and jumbo shrimp ceviche, and the Ginger Sidecar Martini and Blueberry Standard (featuring Russian Standard vodka)

Popular services: Brown Sugar Scrub (15 min./\$50), which uses honey and orange; Caviar Wrap (50 min./\$150); and Voda Platza (about 15 min./\$25), a rigorous Russian massage performed in a dry sauna that uses *venik*-fragrant bundles of oak, birch and/or eucalyptus leaves soaked in warm water

Voda Spa brings old-world Russia to Southern California with caviar wraps, *banyas* (saunas) and *platza* masters (therapists who massage the body with *venik*). That tradition also includes culinary treats from the motherland, such as borscht. The soup is made from liver-detoxifying beets and blue crawfish, which are flown in weekly from Lake Sevan in Armenia.

"We're unique in that we feature a full-service kitchen, separate restaurant and second full bar.

Plus, a smoothie bar is located in our swimming pool, hot tub and sauna area," says co-owner Leon Shparaga, who was born in Russia.

"We want people to feel like they're at home, so we created a menu that reflects that idea," he adds. "We originally wanted to provide a traditional spa menu, but instead opted for a full menu on the healthy side with fresh ingredients."

For breakfast, an omelet bar features scrambled eggs with potatoes and Russian sausage. Lunch and dinner favorites include borscht and various grilled chicken dishes, or



The Athens Vegetarian Wrap at Voda Spa.

PHOTO COURTESY VODA SPA

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deep-fried sole with ponzu sauce. The spa also added jumbo shrimp ceviche with horseradish cocktail sauce. Its signature cocktail—called the Ginger Sidecar Martini—is prepared with Domaine de Canton Liqueur, cognac, triple sec, fresh lemon juice and a sugar rim. Another guest-pleaser is the Hibiscus Margarita, which features Rosangel Tequila, agave nectar and roasted red pepper.

Shparaga has found that the kitchen provides a revenue stream outside of selling services and products. “Our regular clients come for their business lunches or family dinners on days when they aren’t having spa treatments,” he says. “The average person who comes to Voda spends four to six hours here. We encourage guests to hang out, bring friends or a date, eat lunch and drink. The spa is co-ed with a communal, social feeling. So the restaurant and bar are a big part of that. It sets us apart from our competitors.”



Food for Thought

Shparaga suggests featuring a signature dish in the same way you’d highlight a distinctive treatment. “Make sure that the food fits the spa theme, and promote something that your competitors don’t offer,” he says. “We’re the only spa in town serving borscht.”

Paradise Salon, Spa & Cafe

Delray Beach, Florida
paradisosalon.net

Open since: 2004

Popular dishes: Chinese chicken salad, chicken Italiano and Asian chicken sandwiches

Popular services: The Laura Norman Nutritional & Cleansing Program, featuring shakes to help with weight loss (120 min./\$200); reflexology, massage and hairstyling

The theme at Paradise Salon, Spa & Café is casual elegance, and its menu reflects that attitude. “Our spa food doesn’t consist of the traditional fruit-and-veggie plates,” co-owner Tony Abbott says. “We like to give our clients food that they would normally eat on a day or night out. We just make sure it’s done in a healthy way.”



The Paradise Salon, Spa & Café serves a Chinese Chicken Salad as one of its guilt-free menu options.

Nutritious offerings at Paradise Café include the Chinese chicken salad with light dressing, chicken Italiano and Asian chicken sandwiches, and various soups. The café also prides itself on serving (and cooking with) alkaline iodized water. “We’re the only spa we know of that uses it,” Abbott says. “It’s so healthful by providing complete antioxidants and helping to alkalize the body. This may prevent many diseases.”

Ambiance is important to the café as well. Tiki torches are placed around the tables. “Musicians and singers provide entertainment with our special hand-painted piano. We’ve had Regis Philbin visit us. He sat down to play and sing a little bit,” Abbott says.



Food for Thought

While Abbott has a separate, full kitchen in the café, he says that spas without these amenities can easily incorporate healthy cuisine into their businesses. To do so, serve small, simple salads, crudités or other easy dishes. “Join forces with the top restaurants in your area,” Abbott says. “You can ask them to make the lunch for your larger spa packages, or work with them to create a small menu for everyday guests.”

Golden Door

Escondido, California (plus four other locations worldwide)
goldendoor.com/escondido

Open since: 1958

Popular dishes: Japanese Bento box, red lentil veggie burger and Golden Door pizza

Popular services: Golden Door Signature Citrus Blend Sea Salt Scrub with Avocado (45 min./prices vary), Warm Honey Wrap & Orange Blossom Milk

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Soak with honey from Golden Door's own hives (45 min./prices vary), acupuncture and Chinese medicine treatments

When it comes to nourishing guests, Golden Door fuels equal amounts of emphasis and passion into designing a healthy spa menu. It aims to appeal to the epicureans among its clientele. "You're seeing more spas create gourmet food that blends the science of cuisine with the art of it," Bazilian says. "The key is to serve some well-known staples to clients, such as burgers, but to prepare them in a healthy manner. That might involve a turkey burger on whole-grain rosemary bread paired with a salad instead of a regular beef patty and fries. The familiarity and simplicity can be surprising."

The spa's menu also includes its famed Golden Door pizza—a client favorite. It's made with hormone-free turkey sausage, whole-grain pizza dough, vegetables and low-fat cheeses. Another popular choice is the Japanese Bento box lunch, which fills five



PHOTOS COURTESY GOLDEN DOOR

Red Lentil Veggie Burgers and The Golden Door Vegetable Pizza are favorite dishes on the spa menu.

compartments with specially wrapped sushi, rice and other side items.

The spa also offers guests warm potassium-infused, tomato-based broth. It's made from extra veggies in Golden Door's kitchen and comes with a fixings bar that features flaxseeds, red pepper flakes, wheat germ and oregano. "It's healthy and fun for





PHOTO COURTESY GOLDEN DOOR

guests to fix up, and each addition has a different purpose—red pepper helps burn fat, cayenne boosts metabolism, flaxseed contains heart-healthy properties, etc.,” Bazilian says. “Our soup is great for weight loss and debloating.”

“This is an easy item for a day spa to add if it doesn’t already have a kitchen,” she adds. “You can set out a tureen of soup where you’d normally place complimentary water or tea, or you can bill it as an add-on.”



Food for Thought

Bazilian often gives lectures on how to incorporate nutrition into day spas. She advises against an “all or nothing” approach for

feeding clients. “There are many great ways to bring healthy cuisine into your spa that don’t involve opening a separate café area,” she says. “You can start small by offering a few add-ons to treatments, such as a detox tea or wrap. Or, consider vitamin C, which is great for the skin. It’s just as important to absorb on the inside as it is on the outside, so make a plate of grapefruit and orange wedges available to all your facial clients.”

“You could also place dark chocolate on little plates next to the bowl of fruit in your lounge,” Bazilian adds. “It’s all about pleasing the palate in a way that’s good for the body.”

Owning a day spa allows you to provide your clients with nourishment that can get them started on a healthy meal plan. And if you follow the examples set by the spas above, they’ll be surprised by how tasty such dishes can be. ●

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