



Farm Fresh

Thanks to a new chef, an old favorite has gotten even better. Really, if you've never been to Quiescence, head to The Farm at South Mountain.

[Quiescence Restaurant & Wine Bar](#)

The Farm at South Mountain
6106 S. 32nd Street,
Phoenix, 602-276-0601

Quiescence is the best restaurant in Phoenix. Those are fighting words, I know, and by them, I don't mean any disrespect to the Valley's acknowledged giants, such as Pizzeria Bianco (which we all know has the best pizza in the world) or Kai at the Sheraton Wild Horse Pass Resort, which has a bigger budget than a humble restaurant on The Farm at South Mountain could ever dream of. But Chef Gregory LaPrad, who took the reins at Quiescence last March, is quietly turning out food that would shine in any restaurant market in North America. If I had to eat at one Valley restaurant for the rest of my life, this would be it.

Quiescence is in a quirky historic farmhouse at the end of the lane at The Farm at South Mountain, concealed behind a walled garden and accessed by a crooked flagstone path. Seating is on a garden patio, in a cheerful solarium, or in a cozy fireplace room (and there's usually a fire burning this time of year). That alone makes it unique in Phoenix, where, if a restaurant is not in a strip mall, it's probably in a resort. More to the point from the kitchen's perspective, it's also within throwing distance of Maya's at The Farm, a working garden that supplies much of the extraordinary produce for the restaurant's constantly changing menu. It is a privilege that would turn most chefs pesto-green with envy, and LaPrad knows how to take advantage of it.

Take, for example, his candied garden Guarijio and butternut squash soup (\$7), a vibrantly flavored, austere work of perfection that's dazzling after the endless parade of butternut squash

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An arugula salad with Pink Lady apples (left) and a charcuterie plate of sweetbreads (right) are among Quiescence's farm-fresh appetizers.

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soups on every winter menu in town. It doesn't have a garnish because it doesn't need one. Neither does an equally wonderful local Medjool date and sweet onion soup (\$7) that appears on the menu a week later. Its only frivolity is slivers of dates that appear on my spoon as I drag the bottom of the bowl.

"I've really tried to direct it [Quiescence] back to its original concept," LaPrad tells me. "Going back to the simpler ways of cooking things with better ingredients."

In a market where just about every restaurant touts its fresh, local, seasonal food, it's extraordinarily refreshing to find one that truly delivers on its promise. Quiescence's menu changes on a daily basis, because its produce does, too. If a local grower doesn't have asparagus, LaPrad won't buy it from SYSCO. He'll change the menu to use cipollini onions or fennel or whatever that grower does have to offer – a commitment that he admits is "limiting and challenging."

"We're letting the ingredients dictate the menu," he says.

But what results. I'm delighted by a salad of marinated McClendon Farms roasted beets, Black Mesa Ranch dry Jack cheese and farm basil (\$9), a simple but inventive combination that's carried by the superiority of its

basic ingredients. Even the local vegetable crudités (\$10) are a marvel: gorgeous cut carrots, turnips, radishes and tomatoes tossed in olive oil and served with herbed butter and basil and pistachio aiolis. All three condiments are excellent, but I'll be dreaming about that pistachio aioli for a long time to come.

Quiescence is minimalist in its own way, but many of its dishes also reflect extraordinary craft. I order the plate of house-made charcuterie (\$13) on two separate occasions, and each time I'm blown away by the extent of its offerings. Where else can you find chicken mortadella and a lamb's brain terrine on one night, duck bresaola and a country pâté on another, and headcheese and smoked sturgeon on both? LaPrad, who trained at Johnson & Wales University and did an internship in Tuscany, says he tries to buy whole animals and large cuts of meat in order to make the best use of their parts; the house-made charcuterie is a happy result.

Quiescence makes pasta in-house, too. There is usually a pasta choice available as a first plate, like one night's toothy tagliatelle (\$14). It is outstanding with a pork sweetbread and sausage ragout, studded with

fennel seeds and tiny sweet cubes of carrots and celery. (It's so good, in fact, that I have my leftovers the next day for breakfast – the first time, I think, I have had sweetbreads before eight in the morning.)

I also love the saffron *malloreddus* (\$13), firm dumplings graced with Berkshire pork sausage and romalino tomatoes. No doubt,

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LaPrad is putting his experience in Italy to good use. How the kitchen finds time to make its own pasta on top of everything else I just can't imagine, but I am not going to complain.

My husband hits a home run with another *primo piatto*, a creamy, tarragon-scented "bake" of Nantucket Bay scallops, razor clams and fresh shrimp (\$16). The razor clams are a happy surprise – this is the first



After indulging in Quiescence's duck breast served with a duck egg and fresh vegetables (left), enjoy the stellar toffee cream tart (right).

time I recall seeing them in Arizona. On a different night, we share a roasted quail on a bed of creamed spinach and bacon (\$13). It's predictably fantastic.

Main courses have the rustic appeal of very good home cooking, like a mouthwatering wood-grilled Cedar River chuck tender (\$23), served with caramelized fennel and sweet potatoes. The spectacular main attraction – a “Vineyard Road” braised lamb with aromatic vegetables (\$25) – actually comes from a customer's farm; according to LaPrad, she volunteered her flock when she learned of the restaurant's commitment to small local producers. Young's Farm chicken appears regularly in simple and satisfying preparations, like my chicken breast with parsnip purée and roasted onion compote (\$21). And even here, where every night's menu is essentially a list of specials, there are occasionally unlisted surprises – like a tender duck breast served with a quivering duck egg and vegetables (\$25). (LaPrad says he buys duck eggs at the Downtown Phoenix Market when other shoppers haven't beaten him to them. I'm guilty as charged.)

I guess I have a duty to nitpick something, so I'll fault a lackluster fudge cake (\$8) for failing to pull its caloric weight. But that's as close as I'll come to tempting the wrath of

pastry chef Anne-Marie Blanco, who is also responsible for what may be the best restaurant dessert I've had in my life – an absolutely extraordinary toffee cream tart (\$8). A buttery pastry shell lined with chocolate, filled with butterscotch and caramel-colored cream, and garnished for good measure with crumbled toffee and chocolate shavings, this may need to be the one permanent fixture on Quiescence's ephemeral menus. I am favorably impressed by a flaky apple galette with butterscotch-pecan ice cream (\$8), and I'm tempted by a gingerbread shortcake with pumpkin ice cream and cranberry compote (\$8). I also understand that Blanco is responsible for Quiescence's rotating selection of house-baked breads, from a savory walnut bread to chive and cheddar biscuits. Served with butter fragrant with fresh herbs from the garden, they're simply extraordinary.

I would be remiss not to mention the restaurant's wine and cheese. Quiescence has a short but rewarding list of interesting wines that pair well with its food, and a small wine bar in the back room should you stop by for just a drink. And one of these days I'm going to save room for a cheese plate (\$10), three selections from a list of carefully chosen, predominantly American cheeses. Rather than relying on imported

products, LaPrad wants to help cultivate the domestic market in fine foods. So, you'll see picks like Gouda from Willamette Valley Cheese Co. in Oregon and Old Chatham's Hudson Valley Camembert from New York, as well as some Arizona cheeses, including Black Mesa Ranch fresh goat cheese from up in Snowflake and Rainbow Valley farmer's cheese from Maricopa.

The staff members at Quiescence seem to be as passionate about the food as the chef. All of our servers are gracious and genuine – they recognize us and welcome us back on return visits. When I spill the cream for my coffee, my waiter is ready with a napkin. When I'm not sure what wine I'm in the mood for, he's ready with suggestions. Although the atmosphere is certainly informal – a resident cat roams the garden – there are really no missteps in the service.

“We're really trying to be a restaurant that is cooking with a conscience,” LaPrad says. “It's nice as a restaurant to support some of the smaller farmers in the community.” The beauty of the philosophy he describes is that it also results in superior food. The new Quiescence is a big step forward for the Valley – how nice to find it in a historic corner of it. *Dinner, 5 p.m. to 9 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday.*