

KAI COMES ON STRONG AT WEST OF WESTERN CULINARY FESTIVAL

BY GWEN ASHLEY WALTERS



Animated men in crisp white chef jackets maneuver in choreographed harmony inside an elaborately decorated U-shaped tent. The white canopies shade heavy, ornate wooden tables laden with fresh vegetables and several charred cooking vessels emitting heavenly aromas.

I've just arrived at Phoenix Art Museum's Dorrance Sculpture Garden, the scene of the highly acclaimed West of Western Culinary Festival, on a brilliantly sunny Sunday afternoon. Over the course of two days, over 50 Valley chefs will dish out signature dishes to more than 2,000 food and wine lovers who have shelled out \$75 to mingle and munch with the culinary elite.

My mission is to cover the Kai tent, the AAA Five Diamond fine dining restaurant at the Sheraton Wild Horse Pass, and

Chef de Cuisine Jack Strong. Kai (meaning "seed" in the Pima language) is creating a buzz locally and nationally for its innovative Native American cuisine.

A member of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz near the coast of central Oregon, Strong took over the day-to-day operations of the restaurant two years ago. He has spent more than half of his 32 years cooking in one form or another and was wooed from the Phoenician Windows on the Green, where he served as sous chef to Bobby Sanchez.

Kai is remarkable not only because the fine dining Native American restaurant is headed by a Native American, but also because the restaurant sources many of its ingredients from Native American enterprises across the nation, including the local Gila River Indian community's elementary and middle school gardens and the Tohono O'odham's Papago Farms.

And so I find myself standing in front of what turns out to be the most popular tent of the festival. I see Strong, his short, spiky, black hair neatly groomed, standing at the front corner of the tent, describing the Kai offerings to an appreciative crowd gathered around him. The resort's gregarious executive chef, Michael O'Dowd, is nearby. Strong has also brought a crew of nine cooks—his "guys" from Kai and the crème de la crème of O'Dowd's banquet team.

On the far side of the tent, Matt Fenton holds a water-soaked cedar plank over a propane fire until it is scorched and smoking. With tongs, he carries the smoking plank to an EVO grill, a circular flat top pumping 48,000 BTUs off a single propane tank. Joshua House places a three-pound Copper River salmon fillet on top of the cedar, skin side down, and replaces the dome cover.

Fifteen minutes and lots of billowing smoke later, the salmon is a perfect medium. With two wide spatulas and a "heave ho," House lifts the cooked salmon from the grill to a black flat top scattered with smoking mesquite chips a few feet away.

Another chef hands me a healthy two-ounce portion of salmon, tells me to sprinkle it with flaky pink salt from a little white bowl with a demitasse spoon. I step back to taste the salmon as a school of people swim upstream to get a piece of the action. The salmon is warm, smoky, sweet and spicy at the same time. It melts in my mouth.

Edward Farrow, Kai's sous chef, plates up more generous slabs of the smoky sweet salmon as he calls out to the crowd.

"Step right up, get it here, the only thing you need today,"

he shouts in his best carnie voice, as if this luxury restaurant booth was just another stall at the state fair instead of the upscale food festival West of Western has become.

Farrow tells the crowd to finish the salmon with a sprinkle of that salt, which is Murray River salt from Australia, when he hears O'Dowd shouting orders to the cooks from outside the tent. O'Dowd tells them to pull the salt back and garnish the salmon themselves. It's just the first of many orders he barks throughout the day, not in a scary, harsh way, but with a boisterous voice that commands attention. Chef Strong's voice is much softer, and he too, gives orders to the various cooks, but in a gentler manner.

Strong is quick to credit his team for the accolades bestowed upon Kai over the past two years, including his own James Beard Best Chef: Southwest nomination. Although Strong wasn't one of the final five nominees, he feels it was an extreme honor to be included in the top 20 chefs from seven states under consideration for the Southwest region award.

Still dazed from the buttery softness of the salmon, I let Strong lead me on a tour of their booth. Anchoring the salmon station are bowls of black bean hummus with stacks of seeded flatbread studded with pepitas, sunflower and chia seeds.

The hummus, Strong says, doesn't have tahini but is a mixture of black and garbanzo beans, chiles, lime juice and garlic—lots of garlic. The creamy concoction has a sharp bite from the chiles and garlic. Strong says the hummus might end up in the cookbook he and O'Dowd are writing, *The New Native American Cuisine: From Ancient Traditions to Modern Tastes* (Globe Pequot Press), coming out this fall.

Just past the salmon is the dessert station, where another cook is filling teensy, three-inch ice cream cones with a white mousse, placing them upside down on a tray filled with crushed pistachios and a reddish brown ingredient. I ask if I'm supposed to just grab one of the upside down cones. Strong says yes and I ask what it is.

"Goat's milk cheesecake scented with lavender and finished with pistachios, fennel pollen and mesquite meal," he says.

It only takes two bites to finish and I'm in love before the second bite. Sweet, crunchy, nutty and floral—so many taste sensations my head is spinning. How can a little thing pack such a punch?

But Strong is already shuttling me around the corner to the front of the tent where more cooks are dishing out wild game tacos. One cook is frying four-inch white corn tortillas and another is placing a pinch of sienna-hued shredded meat on a fresh, hot tortilla while a third is handing them to the waiting crowd, describing the dish with an alarming amount of information.

"Our wild game taco is a braise of wild duck, buffalo tongue, pork and venison," Sam Baxter says, sailing quickly over the tongue part.

Some would-be eaters catch the reference,

stuttering "did you say tongue?" But Baxter is already describing the contents of the nine tiny copper pots lined up in front of the table, all condiments for the tacos.

Adventurous eaters garnish their tacos with heirloom tomato and raisin chutney, sweet corn pudding, tepary bean salsa, date and curry chutney, tzatziki with chipotle, a couple of roasted salsas, onions and shredded cheese. I want to taste all the condiments but settle for only a couple so that I can still taste the juicy, tender game. The flavor is rich and intense. I taste citrus—orange, to be specific—and only a mild hint of chile.

Strong says the meats are braised in Coca-Cola for hours with garlic and chiles and, best of all, cooked down with duck fat for flavor. I'm tempted to eat another one but I know I need to save room to sample the fare from the other participants.

Strong and O'Dowd circle the wagons, keeping their eyes on the presentation, restocking items so that the table always looks full. O'Dowd keeps the hummus fresh by occasionally drizzling olive oil over the top.

The Kai operation is the most sophisticated of the 25 restaurant stations tucked among the sculptures in the garden. The way the team works together suggests this ain't their first rodeo. They've brought 25 salmon fillets, three pounds each, and before the end of the day, all are cooked and served to hordes of hungry grazers.

After sampling everything Kai has to offer with my personal guide, I tell Strong I'm off to sample his competition. He nods and says he hopes to do the same later. The festival is a mixture of independent restaurants and resorts and I hit the other resorts first, sampling a signature chicken tortilla soup from Strong's ex-employer, the Phoenician.

I bring one back to Strong and he smiles in a knowing kind of way—knowing that his Kai offering easily reduces their signature soup to blasé—although he is much too professional to voice his opinion.





“Bobby [Sanchez] draws from his Hispanic heritage, and he gave me a good foundation for Southwest ingredients,” Strong says of his former boss. Strong says he’s still learning, absorbing information like a sponge, like how to take something as humble as beans and elevate them into culinary art.

“It’s challenging but fun,” he says, obviously relishing the task as well as being in

the spotlight today. These days, Strong is drawing upon his own heritage, creating dishes for Kai that not only please the palate but also tell a story.

BLACK BEAN HUMMUS

Adapted from Kai Restaurant
Serves 8

2 cups cooked black beans
2 cups cooked garbanzo beans
3 ounces cipollini*, peeled
2 or 3 large garlic cloves, peeled
¼ cup fresh basil leaves
¼ cup fresh cilantro leaves
Juice of 2 lemons
Juice of 1 lime
1 tablespoon chipotle in adobo sauce
1 tablespoon cumin
3 or 4 tablespoon olive oil
Salt and pepper

Place first 10 ingredients (black beans through cumin) in a food processor and process until mostly smooth. Drizzle with olive oil and process again until smooth. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

Serve with flatbread or tortilla chips.

**Cipollini, the bulb of the grape hyacinth, looks like a flat, small onion and is used in Italian cooking. Find cipollini near the onions in high-end grocery stores or at McClendon’s Select at the Town and Country Farmers’ Market. Substitute yellow onions if not available.*

“We’re survivors,” Strong says. “You don’t necessarily think of high-end luxury when thinking about Native American culture. I never thought I’d be in a fine dining restaurant and hear flutes or drums beating in the background. It’s special.”

Booth-hopping around the festival, I sample a lovely seared scallop from one resort, a deeply flavored Thai shrimp soup from an independent restaurant and pastry-encrusted short rib from another. I wonder if any restaurant will wow me as much as Kai. Only a few come close.

O’Dowd and Strong give an impromptu speech mid-afternoon, starting with the salmon. O’Dowd says Kai is a celebration of Native American foods with global accents, as he describes the method for preparing the salmon, including the ingredients for the glaze: honey, brown sugar, guajillo and ancho chile powders, cilantro and citrus juices.

“We pay homage to the past while looking to the future,” O’Dowd tells the assembled eaters.

He switches gears to talk about the wild game machaca preparation. After a lengthy dissertation on how to prepare the meats (including a graphic explanation of first boiling the buffalo tongue before skinning off the taste buds and subsequent braising), he turns to Strong, who has stood silently, arms crossed, up to this point.

Strong says, “That’s pretty much it in a nutshell,” and the crowd laughs.

Mark Melter, a server from the Phoenician who worked with Strong when he was sous chef at Windows on the Green, is taking a break from his tent, woofing down a plate of Kai’s salmon.

“Pretty tasty, is it?” I ask.

He nods and says, “The apprentice has become the master.”

We turn and see Strong back at the front of the tent, quietly answering questions from adoring fans. He flashes a broad smile, clearly relishing the chance to share the bounty of Kai on a sun-soaked Sunday afternoon.

Gwen Ashley Walters, a professionally trained chef herself, prefers following other chefs around with a pen and fork to standing over a hot stove. Her website is www.penandfork.com.

KAI RESTAURANT

Sheraton Wild Horse Pass Resort & Spa
5594 West Wild Horse Pass Blvd., Chandler

www.wildhorsepassresort.com

602-385-5726

Open for dinner Tuesday to Saturday

Q AND A WITH CHEF JACK STRONG

Where did you learn to cook?

I was raised by my grandmother, and while she was working, I cooked simple stuff for lunch for me and my grandfather. Later I got a job in a fish and chips type restaurant, but everything was made from scratch. I entered a vocational program my senior year in high school and worked at a resort on the coast of Oregon, about 20 minutes from the reservation. Eventually I attended culinary school in Eugene, Oregon.

How did you end up in Arizona?

I'm the first member of my family to ever move away from the reservation. After eight years at Adam's Place (an independent restaurant in Eugene, Oregon), I felt I had hit a plateau and was ready for a new challenge. I had vacationed in Arizona, and knew it was gaining a reputation for its culinary scene.

What is the best thing about working at Kai?

There are really no limits to working here. We're able to bring in really high-end ingredients and Chef O'Dowd pushes me to try new and different things. Working with the [Native American] community is an added bonus.

Where do you get your inspiration when developing dishes for Kai?

I always try to connect [the dish] with this community because that is who we are representing, the Gila River community. I'll throw something in from my tribe, like salmon, but make it make sense with this community and be playful and fun at the same time.

Do you read a lot of food magazines and cookbooks?

Not as much as I used to. I'd rather trust my own ideas and bounce them off other culinarians, like Chef O'Dowd.



What's your favorite ingredient?

Right now it's beans. There are so many great beans and they all have different textures and flavor profiles. I can take some humble beans and turn them into a velvety, silky smooth purée and, say, serve them with a halibut coming from a tribal entity, and maybe finish it with some fennel pollen. I just really like working with simple ingredients.

What kind of knife do you use in the kitchen?

I have a 12-inch Shun, engraved with my name and five diamonds. It was a gift from the resort after we won the AAA Five Diamond award.

If you weren't a chef, what would you be doing?

I love being a chef. I wouldn't know what else to do. I feel like it chose me, this career. I'm drawn to this [culinary] world.

Besides Kai, where would you take out-of-town guests?

Probably to Tapino's. I like what he [James Porter] does. It's creative and affordable. Maybe to Duck and Decanter, too. I used to work there when I was also working at the Phoenician. I had some free time and wanted to learn about wine.

Where will you be in five or 10 years from now?

As a cook, I've done Spanish tapas, Asian, French, Louisiana Creole and a little Italian. But this, because of my heritage, is what I want to do. I really like working with Native enterprises and showcasing their food.

If you could dine with any three people, who would they be?

Wow, I have no idea. Can I get back to you on that? I don't know, I guess my grandmother. She is a really strong woman. She is 77 and she constantly wants to learn. I get that drive from her.