

The Herb Box Bistro

by **Carey Sweet** - Mar. 27, 2008 07:57 AM
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The Herb Box isn't much bigger than a breadbox. But what the bistro packs into every precious inch is remarkable. Since opening in 2001 in the Agua Caliente strip center at 70th Street and Shea in Scottsdale, it has inspired a rabid following for its artisan salads, gourmet wraps, market fresh sandwiches, flatbread pizzas and assorted entrees, all ready to be washed down with boutique wines and interesting beers.

Over the years, it's turned into the kind of local success story that's nice to see. First dreamed up as a high-end catering company in 1995 by co-owners/chefs Susan Wilcox and Becky Windels, the shop evolved from office space into a restaurant six years later, then expanded into a gourmet market in 2005. In April, Wilcox and Windels are branching out again, opening a second, larger location in DC Ranch, taking over the former Café Citron space with a lengthier breakfast and lunch menu and full dinner service.

Chalk up the achievements to the power of word of mouth. While Wilcox and Windels have been putting out serious food all this time, they've kept a low profile. I never see their names on the rosters at Valley culinary

fundraisers, or catch them on the ubiquitous chef chats on every television news show these days. Instead, they seem content to stay in the kitchen, which is a blessing for diners, since it means they keep coming up with often inventive recipes like the delicious Urban Market salad (\$11), stocked with turkey, watercress, red pepper, avocado, pecans, bacon, sweet corn and gorgonzola. Lucky us: The bird is real house-roasted, the nuts sugared and toasted, and the whole, as is their signature, brilliantly fresh and flavorful.

If you don't know where you're going, it's easy to overlook the small spot among the consignment shops, salons and knick-knackereries that populate the mall. The interior won't immediately help, either, since it feels like an upscale grocery, with many items already packaged and waiting in the cooler spanning one short wall, plus displays brimming with small tubs of white chocolate bark studded with cherries, bottled salad dressings, preserves, butters, exotic salsas, dried fruits and nuts, housemade granola, confections, fresh herbs and produce, gourmet cheeses, and beer and wine for dining-in or taking-home.

And unless you're parking it on the patio, plan on take-out. The three-seater wine bar doubles as a cashier/ordering station, and there are only two tiny tables squeezed alongside. One afternoon, as I dipped my

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crispy falafel fritters (\$11) in tahini yogurt, I almost added a too-close shopper's coat sleeve to the mix of Greek olives and cucumber-tomato salad.

Service is distracted, if cheerful anyway. Staffers in Herb Box T-shirts and ball caps are multi-taskers, pausing from ringing up a shopper's order to drop off a bowl of housemade sweet potato chips dusted in sea salt and curry (\$4), answering the phone while delivering a cold Red Tail Ale, then leaving us to our own amusement for a good long time.

While eating local is a current mantra of the day, Wilcox and Windels have been ahead of that trend for some time. They revere organics, showcasing them, for example, in their signature "Grow Happy" salad of seasonal greens and vegetables tossed with pepitas, feta, pepperoncini and a spritz of vinaigrette (\$8). The menu promises us that local producers are appreciated, honoring Arizona honey, nuts, olive oil, farmers' cheeses, cage-free eggs and natural meats as often as possible.

On one recent visit, the waning edge of winter bounty showed up in a rustic platter of butternut squash enchiladas (\$13), the soft-crispy tortilla cylinders stuffed with fat chunks of gourd and char-roasted corn kernels napped in tomatillo salsa verde, then buried under flurries of bright white queso

anejo and a scattering of fresh-torn cilantro. Vigorously spiced white bean chicken chile (\$5, cup) was satisfyingly hot and chunky and capped with crisp tortilla strips and crema. A light hand with rosemary, meanwhile, gave a woody accent to a grilled steak ciabatta (\$12) without clobbering the pungent herb under white cheddar, caramelized onions, watercress and housemade Dijon.

Going back to their days as caterers, the chefs take pains with presentation, and dishes are uniformly pretty. A chicken wrap (\$11) overflows its tortilla casing with bright rainbow-hued romaine and arugula, Gorgonzola, ruby-red dried cherries, and silvery sugared walnuts. Turkey and baby Swiss (\$11) is much better than an ordinary wrap, too, enlivened by crunchy bacon, gala apple, dried cranberries, cashews, peppery greens and lemon poppy dressing.

Even sitting in a public park eating my takeout pizza (snacking in the car was just a bit too bohemian) seemed classy, given the elegant arrangement of a BLT Caesar (\$11), decorated with blackened chicken, bacon, tomato, vintage cheddar, and romaine salad with lemon garlic dressing. Packaging is thoughtful, with heat-sealing/mess containing plastic and/or foil tucked in handled brown bags.

One of the greatest joys to unwrap is the

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brown-sugar-jerked pork on ciabatta with sweet pepper and jicama slaw, watercress, aioli and smoked gouda (\$11). The ingredients describe its layered pleasures, but imagine also rich, sweet-smoky juices melding into a pillowy charred roll with feisty nips of serious pepper. It's a huge two-fists-required sandwich with obscene amounts of tender pork, and it's wonderful paired with a Sofia Mini (\$4) sparkling wine in a can from the market's cooler.

From beginning to end, Herb Box takes some playful twists on tried and true. A seductively thick crab dip (\$8) is goosed with cilantro-lime, and then given an unexpected punch from cracker-thin plantain chips dusted in chile-lime salt. One day's dessert special was a banana split (\$8) with hot chocolate sauce, but the fruit was caramelized for a crackly, burnt sugar edge.

With its new north Scottsdale location, the Herb Box may be getting bigger. Yet it's hard to imagine how it could be getting better.

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