

[http://napavalleyregister.com/calistogan/lifestyles/bringing-asia-to-the-table/article\\_2b137a0a-70c5-11e2-b116-0019bb2963f4.html](http://napavalleyregister.com/calistogan/lifestyles/bringing-asia-to-the-table/article_2b137a0a-70c5-11e2-b116-0019bb2963f4.html)

Solbar

## Bringing Asia to the table

Solage executive chef takes special menu for 3-month run

Carolyn Younger Feb 7, 2013

SUBSCRIBE FOR 33¢ / DAY



Sous Chef Gustavo Rios, right, assembles Dungeness crab salads on scallion pancakes he has just browned. In back, line cook Roland Abanico. Not shown, grill kitchen line cooks Crisanto Rodriguez and Andrew Iman. Carolyn Younger photo

During last year's winter doldrums, when Anchor Steam arrived at Calistoga's Solbar restaurant and lounge to introduce its micro distillery's Junípero gin — a nod to both the juniper berry and Father Junípero Serra — Solage Executive Chef Brandon Sharp turned

to Spain's Basque region for culinary inspiration.

The result: a menu of tapas created by Solbar Sous Chef Gustavo Rios to pair with the distinctive, Spanish-style spirits.

Winter has returned, but not before Sharp and a former cooking colleague, chef-turned-consultant Bradley Borchardt, aimed their imaginations across the Pacific and focused on an array of comfort foods from Thailand, Korea and China to create this year's winter menu at Solbar's lounge.

Through March, diners can expect the likes of Korean-style charred beef shortribs with pear-ginger marinade and pickled jicama; Dungeness crab salad on scallion pancakes with black sesame, red radish and green apple; fried Chinese long beans with lime mayonnaise and shichimi togarashi spice; pork and ginger gyoza dumplings; and Lucky Pig, a slow-roasted pork shoulder with black sesame crepes, pickled pineapple, Mongolian peanuts, lettuce cups "and more."

This last dish includes the warning: "Some assembly required."

"This year we decided to go a little bit farther with something that would be a little bit more ambitious," Sharp said as he led a visitor along a series of paths, through a gate and into the compact pool-side grill where a staff of five, including Sharp, prepares all the Asian-style dishes.

The larger restaurant kitchen across the way in Solbar proper was already humming along at speed as most of the evening crew — from Chef de Cuisine Ryder Zetts to sous chefs, line cooks, prep cooks and bakers — was readying for that night’s packed house and a banquet for 54.

Inside the grill kitchen, however, it was moderately calm. Rios and line cook Roland Abanico were getting ready for the first of the late afternoon, early evening crowd.

Rios was assembling the Dungeness crab salad on scallion pancakes and Abanico was sauteeing shiitake mushrooms. Slow-roasted pork ribs were on a counter, waiting for the final touch — a brief stint under open flame and a brushing of Szechuan peppercorn glaze.

“This space looks big,” Rios commented without looking up, “but when you get the bodies in here and everyone’s busy, it shrinks.”

The grill kitchen, originally carved out of a shower and changing room and intended to serve guests at the pool, has proved to be a versatile kitchen for the lounge as well, Sharp said.

He noted that Borchardt was the obvious choice as collaborator on an Asian-inspired menu. “We had worked together about 15 or so years ago [but] he spent most of his career in the Far East — Tokyo, Beijing, Bangkok ... and you don’t find this [style of food] Upvalley. I think that’s one reason we can have something as ephemeral as Asian comfort food.”

For somebody whose past cooking experience was “very, very, very French; a little lemon, a little butter, a little salt, a lot of cream, more butter,” the learning curve was “fantastic,” Sharp admitted. “When I stopped being a sous chef and went to master chef, I stopped learning and started teaching, so this was like a masters class for me.”

One of the most surprising discoveries for the 38-year-old North Carolina native “was the symphony of seasoning and tastes that take place at a high level. You have something that is acidic and really sweet, really spicy and really salty, and all at once it’s harmonious. I loved it.”

He laughed as he added, “Your mouth is watering, your tongue is burning, but still everything is working together.”

Sharp slipped into a cooking career when he was a high school student working as a bus boy in a Mexican restaurant.

“It seemed like the cooks had more fun,” he recalled. “I asked the manager if he’d let me fry the chips ... and I went from there.”

After earning a bachelor’s degree from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Sharp trained at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y. and went on to work at a number of restaurants including The Tonic in New York City, where he met Borchardt. Later, he was chef de partie at Thomas Keller’s French Laundry, chef de cuisine at Restaurant August in New Orleans and sous chef at the five-star Gary Danko in San Francisco.

In 2006, Sharp was named executive chef of Solage, seven months before the resort opened, and oversaw the restaurant’s culinary direction — a menu offering fresh, healthy entrees as well as rich comfort food (Tuesday night’s southern fried chicken, for example) all prepared with local, seasonal produce. Every year of the last four, Solbar has been awarded a coveted Michelin star.

The determining factors for anything appearing on the menu, Sharp said, are flavor, authenticity and singularity, “as well as being things we’d want to eat ourselves ... what’s familiar, delicious and what is something people wouldn’t make at home.”

It is safe to say that food is always on the executive chef's mind. He's curious about what others have to offer, samples what catches his interest and doesn't hesitate to give a deserving thumbs up.

Last year, for instance, he posted a list of favorite "sandwich type things" that included the cheeseburger at Gott's in St. Helena; the pork banh mi at Saigon Sandwich on Larkin and Eddy in San Francisco; the French dip with horseradish at the Rutherford Grill; the cheeseburger at Red Rock Cafe in Napa; the Santa Fe turkey and Jarlsberg Swiss with the works at Giugni's; his grandmother's tomato and cucumber sandwiches in the summertime; and the No. 18 (fishy slaw) at Palisades Deli in the Calistoga Depot.

He also once revealed that, Southerner though he may be, he doesn't add okra or gumbo file powder to his chicken and sausage gumbo, easily a four-hour cooking project.

"I was offered fried okra at school lunch every day through senior year," he explained, "and my opinion of it hasn't improved much since then."

As for the Asian menu, Sharp credits local support with its success "and by the same token there is nothing I like to hear better from [in-house guests] than they ate seven meals in a row here and didn't go anywhere else."

As the winter menu gains popularity, Sharp is already considering next year and the direction the menu might take. His thoughts are straying toward Eastern Europe.

Meanwhile, a local winery was planning a luncheon from the Asian menu.

"It's been great to see the interest level and the response," Sharp said. "Locals are part of the driving force behind the menu change. Some of my friends have complained to me that they go to this restaurant and that restaurant and the menu never changes. I know this is an elbow in the ribs for me to say, 'Come on, let's change it up.'"