

## INTERNATIONAL GOLF HOMES

## The 19th hole goes gourmet

Golf courses from Kauai to Mexico are upping their culinary creativity

BY DEBRA KAMIN

The gourmet food event that came to Punta Mita in Mexico in December had all the bells and whistles — Michelin-starred chefs, intimate wine tastings and mixologists shaking up creative new cocktails. But in between tastings, diners on the white-sand private peninsula in Riviera Nayarit were working up appetites in a way that's not common in the culinary world. They were playing rounds of golf.

The celebrity chef Diane DiMeo, a regular on TV cooking competitions including "Chopped" and "Beat Bobby Flay," whipped up shrimp dumplings and freshly grilled fish. Abril Galindo, executive sous chef at the Four Seasons in Austin, Texas, prepared seared beef tenderloin with bone marrow butter. And Sam Choy, whose Hawaiian poke joint in Seattle has an online cult following, led a beachside cooking class while

resort and residential community with two Jack Nicklaus-designed courses.

Punta Mita Gourmet & Golf, where those chefs gathered for the event's tenth installment last December, brought in megastars from both the golfing and gourmet worlds for four days of culinary revelry in the resort's restaurants and on its green.

"More people are saying that golf is for fun, and that goes into the food and beverage offerings," Mr. Emberson said. "So much of the experience is about a great round of golf, a perfect cocktail and something delicious to eat."

Residents of Punta Mita say that while the food has always been delicious, the dial turned up about three years ago, when Mr. Emberson tapped David Vidales to lead the kitchen at the Pacifico Beach Club, which is reserved for property owners. Ron Budacz, 75, a Denver resident who owns a penthouse unit in the resort's Las Marietas condominium complex, where prices range from \$2 million to \$3.5 million, has been visiting for 15 years, and lately, he said, it's the prospect of what he will get to eat that makes him most excited to travel.

"I can honestly tell you that there's more excitement in my family when we return to Mexico each November just knowing what lays ahead of us with the fine dining," he said.

Across the Gulf of California on the Baja peninsula, the culinary bar is rising as well. Cove Club opened in Cabo Del Sol almost three years ago, and will eventually have 375 residences ranging in price from \$4.2 million to \$20 million. The resort's casual eatery, Chiringuita, opened in 2019, and now serves dishes like shrimp steamed buns and cantaloupe and blue crab gazpacho; three more new restaurants are under construction. All will be overseen by Gene Montesano, founder of Lucky Brand jeans and Lucky's steakhouse, a celebrity hot spot in Montecito, Calif.

"Golf clubs, especially those of us in international residential developments, are moving away from traditional golf course food," said Matias Martinez, Cove Club's head of food and beverage.

In Hawaii at Kukui'ula, there are nine different neighborhoods of homes and vacant homesites ranging from \$2 million to \$25 million clustered on the south shore of Kauai. And nearby, the chef Ben Takahashi is sourcing red ginger, papaya and mango directly from his 50-acre on-site farm — and partnering with local fishermen, who supply fresh catches — for meals he crafts, and has delivered, directly to the Tom Weiskopf-designed course.

At Eden Roc Cap Cana, where an 18-hole, par-72 course sits some 270 feet above the Caribbean on the easternmost tip of the Dominican Republic, the Punta Espada golf club was taken over by a Relais & Châteaux culinary team two years ago. The difference, said Joshua Podell, 71, who has owned a



PUNTA ESPADA



COVE CLUB

#### Coming soon

The Cove Club, above, in Cabo Del Sol, on the Baja peninsula, is home to Chiringuita, a casual eatery that serves dishes like cantaloupe and blue crab gazpacho. Three more new restaurants are under construction.

the sommelier Ariel Morales flitted from event to event, ensuring wines from the Valle de Guadalupe in northwestern Mexico — along with authentic, locally sourced tequilas — were perfectly paired with every bite.

Gastronomy has come to the golfing world, and as the palates of residents at golf communities become more discerning, clubhouses are scrambling to overhaul menus and hire celebrity culinary teams. Suddenly, it's not just the golf courses that need to be on par. The dining courses do, too.

"Golf has become a little younger and the people playing, they have a little more spending power, and they're more relaxed in how they approach it," said Carl Emberson, head of marketing and operations at Punta Mita, a 1,500-acre

3,200-square-foot, four bedroom condo at Eden Roc since 2003, was palpable.

"It used to be traditional country club food — club sandwich, Cobb salad, hamburger, hot dog," he said. "There was no attraction to really eating lunch there after a round of golf because it was run-of-the-mill."

Adriano Venturini, the chef who now oversees the kitchens at Eden Roc, doesn't mince words about the change.

"When I arrived at Eden Roc, the food offerings were not really high level," he said. "We asked them to completely change the mood. What they had on offer was basic, the same things you have everywhere. We completely restyled the menu with international dishes that have a Mediterranean feel."

Those include tuna tartare on avocado yuca chips with a soy-honey emulsion; tomato and burrata rigatoni; and arroz con habichuela — a Dominican rice and beans dish with stewed meat.

The menu needed to change, Mr. Venturini said, because the demographics at Eden Roc — like those at golf communities across the globe — have also changed since the pandemic, veering younger and less traditional. Many communities are seeing an influx of families with children as new buyers, and traditional golf, where both manners and menus are rigid, is increasingly being



adapted for a younger, cooler set.

"Before, the food here was just for a senior kind of person, the golf manager or the business person," Mr. Venturini said. "Now I see young people and families coming. Our golf course is in front of the sea, so if you take this place and combine food and drink, it's a perfect match."

Mr. Podell, a retired chief executive of an air cargo company, who comes to Eden Roc annually with his wife, two grown children and four grandchildren, said, "The clientele has shifted."

"They're now more educated, food-wise, so they're demanding a higher level of offerings, and more consistency in the food."

The culinary status quo has been up-

ended in enough golf clubs that there are now awards to be won. Golf Kitchen magazine published its first issue in 2017, tracking and promoting excellent food at golf communities, and in 2018 added the annual Golf Kitchen Culinary Excellence Awards.

On Thursday, the magazine was to host its first ever Golf Kitchen Invitational; the dinner menu was to include Korean braised pork belly with red beet gnocchi from Hannah Flora-Mihajlovic, chef de cuisine at the Addison Reserve Country Club in Delray Beach, Fla., and herb-crusted lamb with cauliflower cream from Shawn Olah, executive chef at North Carolina's Highlands Falls Country Club.

Diana DeLucia, the magazine's publisher, said chefs who might have never considered careers in golf club restaurants were now considering their prospects differently, as well.

"In around 2015, clubs started to realize we need to change up what we're doing, and when the pandemic hit, that accelerated everything because restaurants were restructuring and closing down," she said. "These jobs have much better pay; they have perks, health insurance, sometimes even car allowances. There's a lot changing and pivoting. And it's a really good industry to work in."

#### A new ball game

The Punta Espada golf club, above, was recently taken over by a Relais & Châteaux culinary team. The Dominican Republic resort now serves such dishes as cherry tomatoes with burrata, basil, and balsamic dressing, left.