



Photo courtesy of Cal-a-Vie Spa, Vista, CA.

Santa Fe Chicken Rolls, Cal-a-Vie Spa, Vista, CA.

# Spa Cuisine

by kate hamilton

Whether clients stay for a week at a destination resort or for a three-hour treatment at a day spa, cuisine offerings can add a great deal of value to the overall experience. Leading spas have spent considerable resources in developing unique and healthy eating options for their clients, raising the bar on culinary creativity, as well as nutritionally balanced eating.

Spa cuisine has grown immeasurably from its small green salad roots. Now, elaborately developed meals decorate plates with colorful, flavorful and fresh ingredients optimally balanced to provide the best nutrition available. "Spa food doesn't mean you'll deprive yourself," says Michel Stroot, chef and 20-year veteran of the Golden Door, in Escondido, California. "It's a balanced meal."

## VALUE IN SPA CUISINE

Increased stress and the pressures of daily life leave little room for healthy eating. Dashing through the drive-through for dinner offers an easy alternative to agonizing over the contents of a glaringly spare refrigerator. People are just too busy to cook. Incorporating cuisine into a spa's offerings not only benefits the facility, but also offers a perfect opportunity to educate clients on a healthy lifestyle. "I'm finding a lot of clients don't cook—they don't have

*"Eating should tantalize us with its aromas, dazzle us with its colors and charm our taste buds with its sheer lusciousness."*

the time," says Steve Perneti, chef and 14-year veteran at Cal-a-Vie Spa, in Vista, California. "I emphasize the health aspect and how to cook better. This gets clients interested in cooking again."

Encouraging clients to eat better begins with offering healthy eating options in the spa. Providing nutritionally balanced food that tastes great—from smoothies and herbal teas, and quick-service lunch options to elaborate dining fare for the entire week—can teach clients to improve their eating habits through osmosis.

## ON THE PLATE

Creating healthy spa cuisine takes careful planning of every recipe and meal, ensuring that each dish adheres to nutritional guidelines, while remaining delicious and appealing in presentation. "Eating should

tantalize us with its aromas, dazzle us with its colors and charm our taste buds with its sheer lusciousness," maintains Stroot. It sounds like a tall order, but the basic principles form a foundation with which it is easy to work.

Nutritional guidelines make up the bulk of rules to live by. Chefs at Cal-a-Vie follow the detailed guiding principle: "a low-fat, low-sodium diet high in natural complex



Chef Steve Perneti

Photo courtesy of Cal-a-Vie Spa, Vista, CA.

carbohydrates in the form of whole grains, legumes, fresh vegetables and fruit; modest amounts of lean animal proteins, such as dairy, egg white, poultry and fish; and sparing amounts of natural cold-pressed oils. Providing each element on every plate with every meal, as well as texture and an attractive presentation, create an appealing, balanced diet that is essential for healthy living.

*Presentation should add to the overall experience, not distract from the dining process.*

Planning recipes for a large clientele also requires keeping food allergies, portion size and digestibility in mind. "Ingredients to avoid include common food allergy triggers such as nuts; very acidic, high-fat or hard-to-digest foods; and raw meats that involve special preparation, such as sushi, states Pat Lam, author of *Nutrition: The Healthy Aging Solution* (Allured Publishing, 2004). Meals should be offered with the appropriate information, such as calories, fat and carbohydrate content, as well as any disclaimers notifying clients of the nutritional content of the recipe.

Choosing recipes to feature often calls for a unique flair. "Be creative. People want to eat something they can't make at home that's different, but not off the charts," notes Perneti. Consider the aromas, colors and flavors of each bite to ensure satisfied clients.

### FLAVORFUL ZING

Munching into that first delectable, savory bite can captivate the diner. Flavor is key in selling spa cuisine properly. "As a culinary department, we want to provide a great palate that doesn't deprive," says Scott Uehlein, chef at Canyon Ranch in Tucson, Arizona, a leading spa at providing healthy gourmet cuisine. "It has to be a unique sensory and positive dining experience.

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## SPICY CRAB CAKES WITH TOMATO HERB COULIS

*from Canyon Ranch in Tucson, Arizona*



Photo courtesy of Canyon Ranch Tucson, AZ

1. Combine all ingredients for crab cakes in a large bowl and mix well. Portion 1/4-cup mixture into 2-inch patties.
2. Heat a sauté pan until hot over medium heat. Lightly coat with canola oil. Place crab cakes in pan, and cook until golden brown (about 3 to 5 minutes). Turn and continue to cook until golden brown.
3. Serve 2 crab cakes with 2 tablespoons coulis.

*Spicy Crab Cakes With Tomato Herb Coulis*

**Makes 8 Servings**

### SPICY CRAB CAKES

- 1 pound lump crabmeat
- 1/2 cup minced shallots
- 3 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley
- 1/3 cup Sweet Garlic Paste (see recipe)
- 2 tablespoons diced scallions
- 1/4 cup minced red bell pepper
- 1/2 teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 1 large egg, plus 1 egg white, beaten
- 2 tablespoons low-sodium tamari sauce
- 1 cup bread crumbs
- 1 teaspoon canola oil

### SWEET GARLIC PASTE

- 1 1/2 cups chicken stock
- 4 ounces garlic, peeled and chopped

### TOMATO HERB COULIS

- 4 tablespoons minced garlic
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 6 Roma tomatoes (about 8 ounces), chopped
- 1 cup diced red onion
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh basil
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh thyme
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon pepper

**FOR SWEET GARLIC PASTE:** In a small pot, bring chicken stock to a boil. Add garlic, reduce heat and simmer until most of liquid is evaporated and garlic has formed a paste. Transfer to a blender container, and purée until smooth.

**FOR TOMATO HERB COULIS:** In a medium saucepan, sauté garlic with olive oil over medium heat for about 30 seconds. Add tomatoes, bring to a simmer and cook until tomatoes begin to break apart (about 5 minutes). Add remaining ingredients, reduce heat to low and simmer for 20 minutes. Remove from heat, allow to cool slightly and transfer to a blender container. Purée until smooth.

**Per serving:** Calories: 160; Carbohydrates: 15g; Protein: 18g; Fat: 5g; Fiber: 3g; Cholesterol: 102mg; Sodium: 376mg.

*This recipe was developed by the kitchens of Canyon Ranch.*

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Fresh quality ingredients also are essential, allowing the richness of the natural flavors to inspire the creation of a particular dish. “The key is flavorful and colorful ingredients that are in season and organic,” comments Perneti. “You have to make it look good and taste good, yet remain healthy.

One Cal-a-Vie meal is a trio of pizza slices—a small slice of barbecue chicken, spinach ricotta and tomato basil, along with a small salad. This recipe has remained a 10-year staple at the spa.

“What really drives people to like food is the taste and presentation,” says Stroot. Creating aesthetically pleasing dishes that engage the taste buds and keep clients

interested will make all the difference.

### PLATE PRESENTATION

Because a diner’s first encounter with food is visual, making a plate look appealing is the cornerstone in culinary creation. “The presentation of the food is very important,” emphasizes Stroot. “You’re an artist with the plate. Clients should be compelled to sample the beautifully displayed fare. For example, Stroot recommends placing cooked whitefish on a plate topped with a black bean sauce, a dollop of red salsa, snow peas and cilantro garnish.

Presentation should add to the overall experience, not distract from the dining process. Make sure to include all the

essential nutrition, while keeping it simple. “There’s a reason everything is on the plate,” says Uehlein. “All our plates are carefully thought out and planned.

### BUILDING A MENU

Developing a comprehensive spa cuisine menu requires variation. “You have to be creative with the menu, as well as the meal,” says Perneti. In addition to adhering to nutritional guidelines, maintaining a varied menu and keeping the palate tantalized are essential. Clients should be left satisfied, having enjoyed a great meal that does not consist of a stereotypical spa diet.

Using influences from other cultures also helps to create variety. “The great



Chef Michel Stroot

Photo courtesy of the Golden Door, Escondido, CA.



Chef Scott Uehlein

Photo courtesy of Canyon Ranch, Tucson, AZ.



Golden Gazpacho

Photo courtesy of the Golden Door, Escondido, CA.

advantage of the United States is using the great cuisines from around the world—North African, European, Pan-American and Asian, notes Stroot. Integrating these different elements keeps clients interested throughout their stay, or during return visits.

Offer a choice of soup or salad; three main dishes of poultry, fish and vegetarian options; and plenty of beverages. Also, don't serve the same type of dish twice in a row. "Our goal is a varied menu, providing the highest-quality product and the best dining experience," says Uehlein. Clients remain more engaged when different choices are made available.

## THE CLIENT EXPERIENCE

The manner in which clients experience spa cuisine also is crucial. Just like any other food service business, satisfying their needs makes all the difference. "We all eat at least three times a day. Food is a make-or-break factor. Clients don't necessarily come for the food, but if it isn't good, they won't come back," Uehlein points out. "We want them to walk away saying 'That was great food—not just spa food.'"

Spas also have the opportunity to educate clients about healthy eating habits through example. "I want clients to eat healthy. By educating them, they'll take it home to try something new," says Perneti, who teaches culinary classes at Cal-a-Vie.

Providing information on the value of nutrition adds another resource. "Spas can educate clients through the cuisine offered, as well as with literature containing information about how healthy eating relates to healthy skin and body care, and magazines on various healthy living habits, such as nutrition, exercise and stress management," notes Lam. Place this literature in reception or lounge areas.

Lam stresses the importance of having a trained spa team in place. "The esthetician should be knowledgeable about nutrition and talk with the client about her eating habits during the treatments," she continues. "By offering nutritional guidance, the client begins associating skin care professionals with healthcare."

## A STARTING POINT

Introducing spa cuisine is no simple task, but, when done properly, it can add further value to the overall spa experience. Stroot recommends offering lunch options as a starting point, such as

## GRILLED SWORDFISH WITH ROASTED RED PEPPERS AND ARUGULA IN TOMATO HERB VINAIGRETTE

from Cal-a-Vie Spa in Vista, California

### Makes 8 Servings

4 yellow bell peppers  
4 red bell peppers  
4 Japanese eggplants, sliced diagonally  
2 yellow squash, sliced diagonally  
2 zucchini, sliced diagonally  
16 baby beets  
16 baby carrots  
24 ounces swordfish (3-ounce portions)  
4 cups arugula

### TOMATO HERB VINAIGRETTE

3 4 cloves garlic, minced  
1 2 shallots, minced  
1 tablespoon olive oil  
2/3 cup reserved juice from peppers  
2/3 cup Revitalizer (see recipe)  
2 tablespoons lemon juice  
1 2 tablespoons Dijon mustard  
1/2 cup balsamic vinegar  
1/4 teaspoon hot sauce  
1 tablespoon Italian parsley  
1 tablespoon chives

### REVITALIZER

1 bottle (48 ounces) tomato juice cocktail, preferably low-sodium  
3 cups filtered water  
2 cups assorted sliced vegetables (roots, onions, and green and red bell peppers). Avoid cabbage family vegetables, as they impart a strong flavor.  
2 celery ribs, chopped  
1 large carrot, chopped  
4 tomatoes, chopped  
1 bunch parsley  
2 bay leaves  
1/2 teaspoon crushed hot red pepper, or to taste  
2 teaspoons fresh rosemary, or 1 teaspoon dried  
1/2 teaspoon fennel seeds  
2 tablespoons chopped fresh basil, or 1 tablespoon dried



Grilled Swordfish With Roasted Red Peppers and Arugula in Tomato Herb Vinaigrette

Photo courtesy of Cal-a-Vie Spa Vista, CA.

1. Steam, seed and peel peppers. Reserve pepper juices. Grill slices of eggplant, squash and zucchini. Blanch and peel baby beets and carrots. Grill fish 2 minutes per side. Place fish on a baking sheet to warm through for 10–12 minutes in a preheated 350° oven.
2. *To assemble:* On plates, place bed of arugula. Arrange strips of roasted yellow and red peppers, baby veggies, zucchini, squash and eggplant. Finish fish in oven, then place on arugula. Top with sauce. Garnish with a nasturtium flower to add color. Serve with a side of cooked brown rice, or lemon peel with rosemary.

**FOR TOMATO HERB VINAIGRETTE:** Combine all ingredients in a blender, mixing until smooth.

**FOR REVITALIZER:** In a large saucepan, combine tomato juice cocktail, water, vegetables and herbs. Bring to a boil over moderate heat. Reduce heat to low, and simmer for 40 minutes. Transfer to a strainer placed over a bowl, pressing firmly with a wooden spoon to extract juices, or process through a food mill. Discard pulp.

**Per serving:** Calories: 265 (with sauce); Carbohydrates: 29g; Protein: 28g; Fat: 5.5g; Fiber: 10g; Cholesterol: 34mg; Sodium: 199mg. Percentage of calories from carbohydrate: 42%; Protein: 40%; Fat: 18%.

Recipe courtesy of Cal-a-Vie, created by Chef Steve Perneti.

herbal tea, a protein drink with bananas and blackberries, a vegetarian burger with a mushroom sauce, chili and a seafood salad with a light dressing.

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To meet the dietary needs of a varied clientele, spas should include a small questionnaire on which their food allergies and eating preferences can be indicated. Build cuisine into existing spa packages by providing food and drink options if a client is receiving a treatment that lasts for more than three hours. For those staying for less than two hours, serve healthy drinks packed with antioxidants, such as berry juices, iced teas and herbal teas.

It is important to remember that spa cuisine is just like any other food service, in that it requires permits, food handling and storage. Ensure the proper resources, including money, time, expertise and staff, before incorporating it into your facility.

### TAKE A BITE

Spa cuisine has traveled a long road to reach its current sophisticated status. Emphasizing nutritional value, flavor and presentation can create unforgettable recipes that clients will look forward to enjoying on their next spa visit. Educating clients on healthy eating habits also contributes to the overall credibility of the esthetic team and enhances the spa's unique image. When approached with care and thorough planning, spa cuisine can make a world of difference. ■

## SUMMER FRUIT TART

*from the Golden Door in Escondido, California*

Makes 1 (4 1/2- x 16-inch) Tart

### FOR THE CRUST:

Canola oil in a spray bottle,  
or 2 teaspoons canola oil  
1 tablespoon active dry yeast  
(1 envelope)  
1 tablespoon sugar or honey  
3/4 cup lukewarm water  
1 1/4 to 1 1/2 cups semolina flour,  
plus 1/4 cup for dusting  
1/3 cup sifted whole-wheat flour  
1/2 teaspoon kosher salt  
1 tablespoon canola oil

### FOR THE FILLING:

1 pint blueberries  
2 Golden Delicious apples  
2 teaspoons fresh lemon juice  
5 apricots, pitted and thinly sliced  
3 tablespoons sugar  
1 teaspoon cinnamon  
1/4 cup apricot preserves  
1 tablespoon apple juice or water

1. Preheat oven to 375°. Line a large baking sheet with parchment paper, spray or brush with 1 teaspoon canola oil and sprinkle with semolina flour. Spray or grease a large mixing bowl with 1 teaspoon canola oil.
2. In the bowl of an electric mixer fitted with a dough hook, dissolve the yeast and sugar or honey in the lukewarm water.
3. Combine 1 1/4 cups semolina flour and the whole-wheat flour in a bowl; mix in salt.
4. While mixer is running at slow speed, pour in 1 tablespoon canola oil and add the flour mixture, 1 cup at a time; mix until dough pulls away from the sides of the bowl. If dough is too sticky, add the extra 1/4 cup flour. Continue mixing until dough is smooth and elastic. Place in the prepared mixing bowl, cover with a damp towel and place bowl into a warm, draft-free spot. Let rise for 15–20 minutes, or until dough doubles in volume.
5. Place dough on a floured work surface, sprinkle with semolina flour and knead well for 1–2 minutes; alternate pressing with the heel of your hand and folding the dough over. With a floured rolling pin, roll dough into a rectangle about 4 1/2 x 16 inches in size and 3/8-inch high. Transfer dough to the prepared baking sheet; crimp edges between your thumb and index finger to form a scalloped crust. With a fork, pierce the bottom of the dough several times to prevent it from rising unevenly. Set aside and let rise for 10 minutes.
6. When you are ready to bake, carefully arrange the blueberries in a long, thin row extending lengthwise down the center of the crust, massing the berries so that there is no dough showing through the fruit.
7. Peel and core the apples, and drizzle with lemon juice. Cut them in half lengthwise, then slice each half crosswise into thin crescent-shaped slices. Place the slices on the dough next to the blueberries, overlapping so that no dough is exposed.
8. Arrange the apricot slices in a row on the other side of the berries side by side, as tightly as possible, so that no dough is exposed. Sprinkle the fruit with sugar and cinnamon. Bake for 30 minutes, or until dough is light brown and crisp.
9. Meanwhile, combine the apricot preserves and apple juice or water in a small saucepan. Bring mixture to a simmer on medium heat, stirring constantly. Remove from heat and strain through a fine-mesh sieve. Remove tart from oven, brush with the strained apricot glaze, and let cool. If the tart has cooled completely when you are ready to serve, reheat it in the oven at 350° for 5–7 minutes.



Summer Fruit Tart

Photo courtesy of the Golden Door, Escondido, CA.

*Excerpt from The Golden Door Cooks Light & Easy, by Chef Michel Stroot (Published by Gibbs-Smith, 2003).*