

Top 10 spots to splurge

Some of life's luxuries will be forever out of reach. We'll never drive a Rolls; we'll never move into a Malibu beach house; and we'll never fly a private jet to Switzerland. But one of life's greatest pleasures doesn't require a trust fund, a Ponzi scheme or a winning lottery ticket. We're talking about the occasional gourmet splurge, a three-hour experience that can create

long-lasting happy memories.

When done right, a gourmet meal offers a blend of pampering service, lovely surroundings and, of course, fabulous food.

How about foie gras? You can find it in several mind-bending forms, like foie gras brulee, foie gras dumplings and chawanmushi (Japanese custard)

foie gras. Truffles? There are truffle-infused filet, barramundi in truffle sauce and morel mushrooms with truffled ricotta dumplings. And how tempting do blue corn-crust sweetbreads, lobster fennel bisque and pan-roasted monkfish medallions sound?

You may not be able to live the good life full-time. But an occasional taste of it is bound to lift your spirits.

BINKLEY'S RESTAURANT

The daily-changing menu shows off chef Kevin Binkley's scope, technique and imagination. Prepare for some serious joy from a never-ending stream of brilliant amuse-bouche, as well as the likes of morel mushrooms with truffled ricotta dumplings, black cod with chorizo and a scintillating duo of venison loin and sausage.

Details: 6920 E. Cave Creek Road, Cave Creek. 480-437-1072, binkleysrestaurant.com.

KAI

Pampering service and exquisite regional fare create a memorable evening. Start with a Baja lion's paw scallop dusted with sandalwood and dried mango; move on to buffalo tenderloin with saguaro-blossom syrup; and finish with fry bread with Mexican chocolate.

Details: [Sheraton Wild Horse Pass Resort & Spa](http://SheratonWildHorsePassResort.com), 5594 W. Wild Horse Pass Blvd., Gila River Reservation. 602-225-0100, wildhorsepassresort.com.

NOBUO AT TEETER HOUSE

Inside the dining room, it's an affordable izakaya, a Japanese tavern with small-plate fare. But at the four-seat counter, James Beard Award-winner

Nobuo Fukuda offers a thrilling multi-course dinner. (Reservations are required.) The fireworks may include chawanmushi foie gras, a sea urchin-oyster duo and short ribs grilled on an aromatic hoja leaf.

Details: Heritage Square, 622 E. Adams St., Phoenix. 602-254-0600, nobuofukuda.com.

ELEMENTS

In 2006, chef Beau MacMillan's cuisine reigned supreme on the Food Network's "Iron Chef." Now you can judge for yourself at this gorgeous resort restaurant. The Asian-accented menu may include duck and foie gras shu mai, sesame sweetbreads and five-spiced pork. First-rate desserts, too.

Details: Sanctuary Camelback Mountain, 5700 E. McDonald Drive, Paradise Valley. 480-948-2100, sanctuaryaz.com.

POSH

Chef Joshua Hebert's sophisticated "improvisational" cuisine — different ingredients and preparations every night — is cleverly conceived and skillfully executed. Look for everything from barramundi in truffle sauce to kangaroo with English peas. The foie gras brulee is worth the supplement.

Details: Optima Camelview Village, 7167 E. Rancho Vista Drive, Scottsdale.

480-663-7674, poshscottsdale.com.

QUIESSENCE

Set amid rustic gardens and pecan groves, Quiessence offers a daily-changing menu based on whatever is local and fresh. Chef Greg LaPrad makes terrific charcuterie and homemade pastas. Main dishes can include pan-roasted monkfish medallions and a savoy cabbage wrap filled with guinea hen and foie gras.

Details: The Farm at South Mountain, 6106 S. 32nd St., Phoenix. 602-276-0601, quiessencerestaurant.com.

VINCENT ON CAMELBACK

What happens when Southwestern ingredients meet French technique? James Beard Award-winner Vincent Guerithault opens your eyes with his lobster chimichanga, blue corn-crust sweetbreads and superb desserts like tequila soufflé and tarte Tatin.

Details: 3930 E. Camelback Road, Phoenix. 602-224-0225, vincentoncamelback.com.

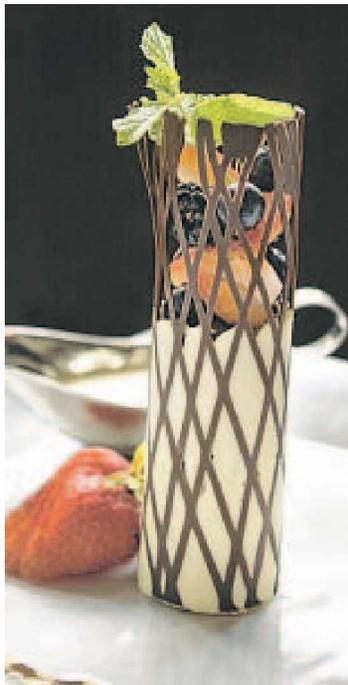
CHRISTOPHER'S & CRUSH LOUNGE



James Beard Award-winner Christopher Gross' French-inspired fare hasn't lost any of its power over the years. You'll find proof in the sumptuous wild mushroom and foie gras soup, smoked truffle-infused filet and knockout chocolate mousse tower.

Details: Biltmore Fashion Park, 2502 E. Camelback Road, Phoenix. 602-522-2344, christophersaz.com.

ATLAS BISTRO



The chocolate mousse tower at Christopher's is a knockout dessert. MICHAEL MCNAMARA/THE REPUBLIC

Bring your best bottle to this funky BYOB, where the daily-changing prix-fixe menu turns any night into a special occasion. Look for a scallop-octopus duo over polenta, pork belly with sweet potato mash and sweetbreads with creamed corn. One of the Valley's best cheese lists, too.

Details: Wilshire Plaza, 2515 N. Scottsdale Road, Scottsdale. 480-990-2433, atlasbistrobyob.com.

T. COOK'S

This dining room is home to the kind of Mediterranean-accented fare that keeps romance alive. Among the attractions: duck a l'orange, curry-dusted bass, Georges Bank scallops and paella. Finish with the wicked caramel cheesecake cr me brulee.

Details: Royal Palms Resort and Spa, 5200 E. Camelback Road, Phoenix. 602-808-0766, royalpalmsresortandspa.com.