

Your Mom's Food, Except Different: Second Home Kitchen and Bar



Written by Peter Bronski



Americans, it's no secret, have long set aside a warm place in their hearts and stomachs for comfort food—meatloaf, mac and cheese, mashed potatoes with gravy.

Denver diners now have a new option to satiate their appetites when they're craving what their Mamas used to make: Second Home Kitchen and Bar in Cherry Creek

Second Home is one of the latest entries into the Mile High City's increasingly vibrant dining scene. With its grand opening in March 2008, Second Home has made a splash with what General Manager Jeffrey Par calls "comfort food with an upscale twist."

Given the restaurant's location inside the J.W. Marriott hotel, the upscale twist seems only fitting. Think creamed corn, spiced up with green chilis or a Cobb salad topped with Maine lobster and tarragon vinaigrette or an "inverted" root beer float (read: root beer-flavored ice cream with vanilla soda).

Such offerings are the inspired creations of Executive Chef Che Frey, who studied at the Culinary Institute of America in New York before apprenticing at veritable restaurant institutions like Le Cirque and Gotham Bar & Grill. But if credit for the menu goes to Frey, then credit for the restaurant as a whole belongs to Peter Karpinski, the 33-year-old Senior Vice President and public face of Sage Restaurant Group.

SRG was born in 2005 as the child of Sage Hospitality Resources, a major hotel management and development company (SHR manages the J.W. Marriott in Cherry Creek). Sage Hospitality was looking to launch a restaurant group, and hand-picked Karpinski as its leading man. Karpinski was no stranger to the hospitality biz. After graduating from Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration, Karpinski followed a rapid upward trajectory that took him from his native New York to San Diego, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and eventually, Philadelphia, which is where he lived before moving to Golden for the new position with SRG.



Along the way, Karpinski served at Four Seasons Hotel and Resorts, Caesar's Entertainment, and his own consulting company, gradually shifting from the hotel side of hospitality to the restaurant world. Heading up the newly formed Sage Restaurant Group seemed the obvious next step.

Sage Restaurant's mandate was to create individual concept, street-level restaurants. "We wanted to do restaurants that are dynamic," says Karpinski. "They are design and experience driven, but at the end of the day, they're simply fun. They're not pretentious or arrogant or condescending. They're for America."

The first two opened last year—The Corner Office in downtown Denver, and Temple Downtown in Providence, R.I. In March of this year, two more came online—Second Home in Cherry Creek and Mercat a la Planxa in Chicago. Later this year and early next year, three more will join the list: Urban Farmer, Departure, and The Original, both in Portland, Ore.

True to SRG's goal of creating unique one-off restaurants, each locale has a flavor all its own: global fusion, modern steakhouse, Asian, classic American diner, Spanish tapas, and in the case of Second Home, familiar comfort food (if upgraded a notch or two).

Which was exactly the point. "We are trying to do restaurants that are really specific and make sense," Karpinski explains. "We created Second Home for the residents and people who live and work in Cherry Creek."

By that measure, Second Home is a resounding success. Despite its location inside the Marriott, more than 75 percent of Second Home's clientele are locals, rather than the tourists and business travelers you might expect.



For sure, the modest prices have something to do with it—the most expensive entrée on the menu is under \$30, and Second Home's extensive wine collection is primarily priced between \$30 and \$60 per bottle.

Then there's the décor. SRG tapped the expertise of Andre Kikoski Architect, a firm that has been named a James Beard Award Finalist for its restaurant design. Tables are spaced far enough apart so you don't feel crowded. Dry-stack stone walls serve as homage to the Rocky Mountains, and accent lightening warms the atmosphere.

But the true measure of any restaurant is its food, and Chef Frey delivers.

On a recent visit, I enjoyed perfectly cooked Hangar steak infused with a touch of black truffle oil, and accompanied by a tomato salad (halved grape tomatoes, olive oil, fresh basil, garlic). My wife, Kelli, and I shared a tuna tartar appetizer, as well as a chicken and mushroom tamale with a smoky chipotle sauce (excellent). The menu includes nine artisan, brick-oven pizzas, and oodles more options to tempt your palate (apple and mango chicken salad, all-natural Colorado chicken, leg of Colorado lamb, to name a few).

The food may have an upscale twist, but Karpinski is right – Second Home lacks the pretense you might otherwise expect at such a restaurant.

The meals may not look quite like the comfort food your mother used to make, but they are delicious nonetheless. And if Second Home's intent was to become your second home (or second kitchen), it just may succeed. I know that if I lived in Cherry Creek, rather than Boulder, I'd be back at Second Home in a heartbeat for a second helping, and then a third, and a fourth...

Photos courtesy of: Second Home Kitchen and Bar, Thomas Hart Shelby

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Peter Bronski is an award-winning writer from Boulder, CO. He is a regular contributor to 5280: Denver's Mile-High Magazine, and his writing has also appeared in Men's Journal, Caribbean Travel & Life, Vermont Life, and many others.

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