

## Coincidentally kosher

Todd Aarons (pictured below), executive chef at Tierra Sur, has created an inspired Mediterranean menu that just happens to be kosher.

By Wendy Gillett

Tucked away just off the 101 freeway in Oxnard, there is a restaurant where the food is an incredible array of flavors and colors, the chef is passionate and dedicated beyond his years, and each of the many varietals of wine offered on the list is bottled on the premises. Sounds incredible, right? By the way, one more thing, it also just happens to be kosher.

Chef Todd Aarons, executive chef of the incredible Tierra Sur located just inside the Herzog winery, has produced a rarity in Ventura County. He has created a place where kosher diners can come to enjoy a glorious high-end meal; but, more importantly, he has created a place where everyone can take pleasure in an inspired Mediterranean menu, a goal he easily accomplishes by using kosher ingredients and ordering meats from kosher butchers. There are very few barriers to producing great kosher food," says Aarons, "and if I couldn't have found a way to be great, I would have picked another career."



Aarons spent some time searching for the perfect place for his culinary gifts and, after a journey to Israel, found what he was looking for both spiritually and creatively. He decided to embrace his religion and begin a quest to create unbelievable kosher food (since one of the things he discovered was how difficult it was to find an upscale restaurant that served kosher). After owning his own bistro on the east coast, he was wooed by the owners of Oxnard's Herzog winery with the promise of creative control over his menu, his intense knowledge and relationship to Mediterranean cuisine striking a cord with the winery owners. While cooking in Italy, Aarons says, he would walk through the Tuscan fields to get to work each day, and "the connection between the food and the land is incredible there. You smell the fragrance of the land and it incorporates into the food."



In reflection on his experience, the name Tierra Sur was important to Aarons, signifying to him the food of the earth, right here in Ventura County's southernmost winery. Tierra Sur's extensive menu has many creative offerings. The heirloom salad boasts the freshest of tomatoes with a sampling of pesto made with different basil, all from local growers. Then there is the robust pomegranate marinated lamb over couscous, which is a delight to each of the senses as the sweet smell of the pomegranate glaze dances with the charred, tender meat.

In the evenings, diners can heighten their senses even more on the patio as the meats, such as the famous rib eye, cook on the wood-burning grill over a mixture of oak and mesquite, the live music plays with an eclectic selection of musicians, and the wine dinners tantalize the taste buds. And these happenings are not just for special occasions anymore, notes Aarons: "I love it when a customer likes a wine in the tasting room and then allows me to create a dish around it 'just because' it is wonderful when they leave it up to the chef." Because at Tierra Sur every

meal is a special occasion filled with history and heritage as you really are connected to the earth through the food.

And what about the rest of his kitchen staff? Are they as passionate about the kosher menu as Chef Aarons? "None of us come to work thinking 'we are going to make kosher food today.' We come to make high-end food. We are producing great food...that just happens to be kosher." ●

Tierra Sur is located in Herzog Wine Cellars at 3201 Camino Del Sol, Oxnard. For more information, call 983-1560 or visit <http://www.herzogwinecellars.com/>.