

OCTOBER 1 - OCTOBER 7, 2020

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ASPEN TIMES WEEKLY



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# PLATO'S REPUBLIC

Chef Rachel Koppelman's food philosophy at the Aspen Meadows Resort: virtue of environment

**WHEN I ARRIVE** on Plato's patio at the Aspen Meadows Resort to meet a friend before

sunset a couple of weeks ago, wildfire smoke is thick in the air. The view west is otherworldly: The sun glows red like an ember floating against a

gauzy, blue-gray sky, striated with layers of airborne ash like strips of torn tissue paper. Yet I feel instantly soothed among 74 well-spaced seats. Certainly this is one of the most wide-open places to dine outdoors in Aspen.

A quick bike ride away from the downtown core, Plato's modern deck has expanded seating over the Albright Pavilion (pictured, above right) due to COVID. Surrounded by aspen trees, scrub oak and sagebrush, all of which line the Rio Grande Trail below, the scene is intoxicating (despite the smog, we gulp it down).

We're here for chef de cuisine Rachel Koppelman's Harvest Menu, a selection of dishes showcasing hyper-local ingredients from area farms available Wednesday through Sunday evenings through Oct. 25 (\$12 to \$44; diners typically choose one item from each of three courses, in a modified prix-fixe). Koppelman, who was chef de cuisine at Bosq for the past four years and is an alumna of Eleven Madison Park (post-Culinary Institute of America at Hyde Park, natch), assumed leadership of Plato's kitchen in July. She launched her own Harvest Menu to express the varied flavors, colors, and textures

of the natural world just steps from her kitchen.

As natural light wanes, Koppelman sets down the beef main course on our table. A 6-ounce prime tenderloin is nestled on a dramatic slash of charred onion crema topped with roasted mushrooms, blistered shishito and sweet Jimmy Nardello peppers, with some kind of dark grain beneath it. Bright green purée crisscrosses the plate, mimicking the shape of watercress stems piled on top. *The beef is almost hidden among the foliage*, I think. In the twilight, it could be a freshly unearthed truffle nugget. It's not, of course, but I do catch a whiff of an umami aroma.

Sure enough, Koppelman conceived this dish as if "you could drop it off the deck and it would camouflage into the surroundings," she says. "I wanted it to look like you were walking in the woods and it would blend right in."

We dig it. The crispy-edged mushrooms taste of shoyu and white wine; tomatillo lends little bursts of acidity in the purée; and the "dirt," Koppelman explains, is dark-toasted black sesame seeds ground up with crispy shallots, charred leek ash, and chives. I recognize leek ash from Bosq; chef C. Barclay Dodge is a master of concentrating flavor by burning or dehydrating foods, a philosophy over which they connect.

"I'm all about what's growing near us, around us, what's seasonal, what's *there*," Koppelman says. "And not adulterating it very much."

Weeks ago, Koppelman accented this dish with a serviceberry jam, which she discovered on a walk around the property. A



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colleague at the front desk, an avid forager, seems happy to oblige her whims when kitchen resources run low.

"Dave, I need a garnish!" she'll say. "And we'll jump in a golf cart and take off across the property to find something before service."

Koppelman grew up surrounded by woodlands in Missouri. So practicing her craft at Plato's, where she's able to pluck herbs and flowers at whim, feels like second nature.

"We live in this beautiful place," Koppelman marvels. "The food should match where we live."

Each week Koppelman changes up the Harvest Menu: a vegetable here, a garnish there, a new bitter green instead of baby lettuce (by now long gone). A choice of three main dishes always includes fish (lately, Colorado striped bass with the last of the Olathe sweet corn, crunchy white *hakurei* turnips, and drops of peach purée), beef, and a handmade vegetarian pasta, plus three starters and desserts.

The lemon ash cavatelli stood out for its sheer mystique: coated in a glossy, deep-plum-colored sauce steeped with fig and black garlic and adorned with edible flowers—a Koppelman

signature when she ran the pastry program at Bosq. ("I'm obsessed," she declares. Meanwhile, she's grateful to have seven-year Aspen Meadows executive pastry chef Aleece Alexander handling confections. And I was thrilled to learn that longtime spirits professional Danielle Becker has been named food and beverage director, creating a solid female power trio.)

Color, shape and texture guides Koppelman's creative process, evident in her Alaskan King crab starter, chillin' in a shallow pool of cool heirloom tomato soup.

"I had (diners at) a table ask if I dropped my breakfast into it," she says, a definite dad joke regarding her use of oat, pepita and hemp heart granola to garnish. Sweetened slightly with honey, it adds a pop of crunch to balance the creamy, acidic tomato.

As harvest season winds down, Koppelman is thinking ahead. She's steeping rosehips and chokecherries into vinegar and pondering a winter version of the Harvest Menu to serve inside Plato's airy dining room, which underwent a total renovation in 2018 (the restaurant closes for offseason Oct. 26 to Dec. 3) along with Limeslicer's Bar.

## IF YOU GO...

**PLATO'S AT THE ASPEN MEADOWS**  
845 Meadows Road  
970-544-7824

**Harvest Menu**  
Wed-Sun, 5-9 p.m.  
Choice of 3 courses  
\$12-\$44  
**Casual Dining Menu**  
Daily 11 a.m. to 9 p.m.  
Through Oct. 25  
[platosaspen.com/platos](http://platosaspen.com/platos)

Clearly in her element, she's staying flexible. Instead of offering the Harvest Menu only for indoor dining, Koppelman preserved Plato's classic à la carte Casual Dining menu for folks who favor juicy burgers and chicken Caesar salads for dinner as well as lunch, seated indoors or out. As an arts mecca, most notably the former stomping grounds of Bauhaus legend Herbert Bayer, the Aspen Meadows environment elevates such fare anyway.

"I kind of like that people have the all-day menu option," Koppelman muses. A diner can chomp down on "a cheeseburger and then someone is eating an awesome filet next to them. It's a cool balance."