



The Great Outdoors

Brandywine's restaurants serve a side of atmosphere along with the fresh air **By Pam George**

Since its 1993 opening, Pizza By Elizabeths in Greenville has offered outdoor dining, making it a favorite summer destination.

When the restaurant moved to a larger nearby location in 2009, co-owner Betsy LeRoy met with landscape designer Bill Duncan to scope out the breezeway entrance.

Standing in the dim area, surrounded by brick walls, LeRoy asked Duncan what could be grown there to make it more appealing. "He basically said, 'Nothing,'" she recalls. Then Duncan came up with the idea of manmade trees. LeRoy asked for an example. "His response was that he hadn't actually done it, but was confident she could," she says.

Today, Pizza By Elizabeths' outdoor dining area is a sylvan oasis in a strip center. The gnarled trees, some of which sport heart-shaped carvings and initials, stretch over tables and chairs. A water feature gurgles from inside a fireplace. The atmosphere is part European and part fantasy world.

While sunny patios may have an advantage when the weather is cool, the shady spot has its benefits when the sun turns brutal. "It's also popular at night, when our 'trees' are lit with little white lights and we have lots of burning candles," LeRoy says.

Pizza By Elizabeths is not the only restaurant in the Brandywine capitalizing on al fresco dining. Buckley's Tavern in Centreville has three outdoor spaces: the rooftop, the front porch and a garden terrace.

"Literally, the first nice day of the year – which was in March – there was a line out the door to dine outside," says David Weir, Buckley's owner.

Pizza By Elizabeths and Buckley's prove

that while al fresco is enticing all on its own, it helps to sweeten the appeal with ambiance, entertainment and special options.

Weir learned firsthand what a little atmosphere can do when he gave Buckley's rooftop dining an overhaul. Previously, the space had resin chairs, outdoor green carpet and plastic glasses. "On its best day, it looked like somebody's backyard in Philly – all vinyl and plastic," Weir says.

It's now a bucolic getaway. A green roof – laden with plant life – runs atop the bar and cocktail area. A water feature puts the Zen in the evening. Well-positioned lighting lets guests view their food without seeing spots from glaring bulbs, and glassware has replaced plastic ware.

The newer terrace takes the same approach. Framed with stone and brick walls, the area has a rustic fireplace for warmth, and plantings seemingly flow from every crevice. The place is so magical that a rehearsal dinner party once huddled under the awning during a thunderstorm, preferring to be outside rather than in.

The Gables at Chadds Ford also defines its outdoor dining space with stone walls, one of which serves as a backdrop for a waterfall. Sitting under umbrellas, guests can literally stop and smell the roses, which comprise the mature plantings.

At the Centreville Café, customers take their Nicoise salad and gourmet sandwiches out to the gardens to lunch with hummingbirds. Owner Susan Teiser also operates Montrachet Fine Foods, a catering company, which holds special wine dinners in the café gardens.

"People who come in early evenings love the quiet and the blooms in the garden," she says. She dresses up the tables with candles and fresh flowers.

Finding nature is no problem at

At FireStone on Wilmington's Riverfront, more than 500 diners can be seated in the multi-tiered area.



The shady breezeway of Pizza By Elizabeths (top) in Greenville is perfect on a sultry summer day or night, while diners can soak up the sun at Aqua Sol in Bear (above), overlooking the Summit North Marina on the Chesapeake & Delaware Canal.

Longwood Gardens, whose 1906 Restaurant opens onto a patio surrounded by mature trees.

“It’s simply breathtaking,” says Tijs Wolters, general manager of Restaurant Associates, which manages the food service. “People come here to relax and have a great time.”

Al fresco dining is particularly appealing when diners can savor a water view. One of the best-known Wilmington Riverfront patios belongs to FireStone, which can seat more than 540 in the multi-tiered area. “Our diners love our patio,” says Rick Whittick, general partner. “It’s all they talk about.”

The patio flouts a tropical theme, complete with tiki torches, tropical plants and lounging couches. It’s the place to be on Thursdays for a pre-beach sendoff. And those who stay in town on weekends head here for live music or DJs.

Warmer climates also influence the atmosphere at Aqua Sol at the Summit North Marina on the Chesapeake & Delaware Canal. The restaurant, which embraces a Latin influence, features a patio that seats up to 100. Flowing curtains, white tables and white umbrellas are reminiscent of the clean lines found in South Beach hotspots.

“It looks just like you’re outside on a patio in Miami,” says owner Curtis Busz. The restaurant offers soft live music on Fridays and live bands on Saturdays.

In city and town settings, being part of the action is a major facet of outdoor dining. So much so that Caffé Gelato in Newark increased outdoor seating from nine to 15 tables to meet the demand. From beneath the restaurant’s striped awning, guests can see and be seen in shady comfort.

Of course, there are drawbacks to outdoor dining. Sudden storms are a risk. And in late summer, bugs like to join the party. For many, that’s an inconvenience they’re willing to accept.

“Anytime I can be outdoors,” Teiser says, “I’ll put up with a few bugs.”