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LIFESTYLE IN THE NORTHERN ROCKIES



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DINING OUT | SEABRING DAVIS

Seasonal Bliss

Ox Pasture in Red Lodge, Montana, serves up farm-to-table fare

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LYNN DONALDSON

ALONG RED LODGE'S MAIN STREET, crisp white linen curtains and cornflower blue lettering on a cafe window called out to me like the sparkle of the witch's ruby slippers from *The Wizard of Oz*. "This is new," I said to my husband as we crossed Broadway, heading toward the warm glow of the restaurant's open door. A glance at Ox Pasture's menu may as well have said: "You are not in Kansas anymore, Dorothy!"



Owners Gena Burghoff and chef Chris Lockhart sit with baby Saxon at the bar of Ox Pasture. The couple brings a friendly, farm-to-table mission to their seasonal restaurant.



In a state best known for beloved hearty basics (burgers and steaks), Ox Pasture adds a twist to Montana cuisine with a true farm-to-table menu. The menu changes every two weeks based on the season's bountiful harvest. That might be fresh wild mushrooms in May, turnips and radishes in July, or Montana berries in August to accompany an array of local, ranch-sourced beef, pork, chicken, and trout.

The Ox's doors opened quietly in May 2016, but word spread quickly that the new kid on the block served delicious dishes. Owners Gena Burghoff and chef Chris Lockhart have decades of experience in the restaurant business between them. First, the husband-and-wife team ran a farm-to-table food truck called the Local Yokel for six months. Most recently, the duo headed up Montana Jack's in Dean, with Wyoming-raised Burghoff's gracious greetings at the front door and British-born Lockhart's memorable cuisine

ABOVE: Scallop crudo and cucumber sorbet are garnished with dill and smoked trout roe. **RIGHT:** The idea for a new restaurant in Red Lodge was conceived of by David Leuschen, a fourth-generation Montanan, and his wife, Alexia Kondylis Leuschen, an interior designer. They teamed with Burghoff and Lockhart to fulfill their vision of an eatery that would highlight the produce and foods of the region and reinvigorate Red Lodge's historic downtown.

in the kitchen. But before that, they spent time in Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and New York City (Cody, Wyoming, too!), and they humbly list stints with Odeon, Balthazar, and Steven Star restaurants. At Ox Pasture, that urban experience translates not as snooty but as well-seasoned and professional.

Chef Lockhart honed his cooking skills in the kitchen of Cafe Regis, another local restaurant up the street. There he experimented with seasonal cooking by using the freshest ingredients from the restaurant garden. It wasn't a new thing for him.

"I think growing up in England, the farm-to-table concept and eating locally is just part of the culture," he said.

His food is influenced by international travels and innate foodie creativity. That means one menu may have French influences — for instance, a duck confit leg or addictive potato frites — or Southern-leaning flavors that capitalize on abundant fried green tomatoes and a salsa of ripe apricots. Another dish might give a nod to Italy with house-made tagliatelle pasta, garden beets, and peas with local





Amalthea goat cheese.

“My kind of cooking is using the parts that wouldn’t normally get used,” Lockhart explained. “I’ll use green carrot tops for a pesto or trout skin crisped and cooked with risotto.”

To that point, incorporating uncommon cuts of beef or showcasing fresh-grown herbs shows a dedication to using seasonal ingredients from local farms and ranches, and the flexibility of a small restaurant. It adds diversity of flavors and allows for creative cuisine. It also presents a challenge in the kitchen for Lockhart and sous chef Danny Mowatt. Twice a month they brainstorm over a list of ingredients that are in full bloom and concoct a dozen new items. There are staples, of course: Montana



trout, a steak, chicken, pork, and vegetarian offering, and often lamb, duck, as well as fresh seafood. But the preparation is always new. “There are no do-overs at Ox Pasture,” said Lockhart.

The Ox’s ambience is also a departure from Montana’s rustic style. Situated in a historic stone building, the walls are whitewashed for a light, airy atmosphere accented smartly with blue and tan wicker chairs interspersed with clean, gray-painted wooden chairs and zinc-wrapped tabletops. In the front of the restaurant, a short bar lines one wall, with white shelves that meet the ceiling, showcasing terracotta pots of herbs and a selection of beverages. A gleaming espresso machine anchors the opposite wall. Pickled-wood plank floors stretch back from the front door to the open

ABOVE: During a busy dinner service, chef Chris Lockhart and his team concoct original preparations from the open gallery kitchen of Ox Pasture. **LEFT:** Montana trout, zucchini spaghetti, carrot-top pesto, and roasted tomatoes are accompanied by an Israeli couscous with roasted vegetables and crème fraîche.

kitchen with an urban, loft-like elegance. The milieu is reminiscent of a French bistro with the influences of an Old West mercantile. The idea to renovate the historic building was conceived by David Leuschen, a fourth-generation Montanan, and his wife, Alexia Kondylis Leuschen, an interior designer who dreamed of having a restaurant that would reinvigorate Main Street and focus on the foods of the region.

“We wanted the decor to be original to Montana, but also be a space where the food would really be the centerpiece,” added Burghoff. “It’s meant to be a blank slate that allows the food to pop on the plates.”

Burghoff and Lockhart have long been purists dedicated to eating locally. The restaurant is truly seasonal, open regularly only from May through October, when fresh produce is available. During the winter months, they will open for private parties and a New Year’s Eve celebration dinner. “It’s just not worth staying open through the rest of the year to serve meat and potatoes,” Burghoff stated. “It would go against our whole mission statement of fresh, local, and in season.”

But the couple won’t exactly hibernate when Ox Pasture’s kitchen is idle. Those months will be used for travel and inspiration that surely will infuse next year’s menu with exotic influences.

ON ANOTHER VISIT (for which my husband and I felt it worth the 240-mile roundtrip drive from Livingston just for dinner), I savored a wagyu bavette steak (similar to flank steak) and a kale Caesar salad with warm croutons. My mouth waters at the memory. Checking the newly changed menu on Ox Pasture’s Facebook page, I see that my precious wagyu bavette isn’t offered now. Next time I’ll just have to try something different.

The changing menu introduces a welcome hint of discovery to every dining experience here. On my first visit I enjoyed the best pork chop of my life (magically seasoned with sage and spruced up with purple potatoes, bacon, and braised greens). The fact that it may never appear again on Lockhart’s menu is bittersweet, but that’s part of the allure. My next visit included an appetizer of duck confit on crispy, salty, fried chicken skin,



Incorporating the freshest ingredients even into the beverages, Ox Pasture offers the Lawn Mower “Mocktail,” which combines cucumber, celery, and mint bitters with soda and simple syrup.

topped with crème fraîche and trout roe. It was an elevated interpretation of loaded nachos. I’ve never eaten anything like it. And though I’d like to, it’s possible that I never will again. Because enjoying a meal at Ox Pasture is like walking Oz’s yellow brick road: You never know what to expect around the next bend. ▲

Award-winning lifestyle journalist Seabring Davis writes about what she loves: food, art, travel, and interesting people. The former editor-in-chief of Big Sky Journal and editor emeritus of Western Art & Architecture, she is the author of two cookbooks, A Taste of Montana: Favorite Recipes from Big Sky, and A Montana Table: Recipes from Chico Hot Springs.

Lynn Donaldson shoots regularly for National Geographic, National Geographic Traveler, Travel & Leisure, Sunset, and The New York Times. She is founder and editor of the Montana food and travel blog The Last Best Plates. Lynn lives outside Livingston with her husband and three children.



OX PASTURE'S

Steak Tartare, Crispy Green Tomatoes, Red Hollandaise

..... SERVES 4

FOR THE STEAK TARTARE

- 1 pound beef tri-tip
- 2 tablespoons capers
- 2 tablespoons shallots
- 2 tablespoons parsley
- 2 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 pinch salt

Using a very sharp knife, clean the steak of any tough silverskin. Cut the steak into thin slices (with the grain), then cut across the slices to create strips of meat. Turn the strips of steak and cut across again into tiny cubes and place in a bowl. Add all other ingredients and stir well to combine.

FOR THE FRIED GREEN TOMATOES

- 3 green tomatoes, cut into 1/3-inch slices
- 1 cup all-purpose rice flour
- 1 cup cornmeal
- 3 eggs
- 1 tablespoon onion powder
- 1 tablespoon garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon smoked paprika
- ¼ teaspoon cayenne
- vegetable oil
- salt

Add the eggs into a bowl and whisk. In another bowl, add the flour. In another bowl, combine the cornmeal, onion powder, garlic powder, smoked paprika, cayenne and stir. Slice the tomatoes into 1/3-inch slices and one at a time dredge first in the flour, then in the eggs and finally the cornmeal until fully



coated. Heat 3/4-inch of vegetable oil in a medium skillet to 350 F. Working in batches, fry the tomato slices until golden brown, about two minutes per side. Using a slotted spatula, transfer the cooked tomatoes to a prepared baking sheet and season with salt. Keep the cooked slices warm in the oven while you fry the remaining slices.

To assemble, put three slices of tomato onto the plate, top with tartare, and finish with the hollandaise.

FOR THE RED HOLLANDAISE

- 3 egg yolks
- 1 cup clarified butter
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- 3 tablespoons tomato paste
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 pinch pepper

Over a double boiler, whisk the egg yolks until they are thick, but still a little runny. Take off the heat. Slowly start to whisk the clarified butter into the egg yolks starting with just a few drops at a time. Gradually add more and more butter until it has all been incorporated.

At this point, add the tomato paste, lemon juice, salt, and pepper, and mix until combined.