

A Snowy Escape

A ski weekend turns out to be as much about great food as it is about the slopes. BY CLARE KLEINEDLER

It's a steep and winding drive up into the mountains, and the higher we climb, the colder it gets. Little ice crystals have formed around the edges of the windows and the shuttle driver turns up the heat as we ascend further into the snow-covered hills. When I finally arrive at my condo, I'm careful stepping out of the van. The ground is covered with a thick sheet of ice, and my slippery tennis shoes aren't the proper footwear for these conditions.

For us "Los Angelinos" who live in balmy conditions pretty much year-round, the sight of all this shimmering, white snow against the crystal-blue sky is breathtaking and shocking all at once. I'm in Keystone, Colorado for a ski and foodie weekend getaway, and while I'm completely in my element with the latter, I have never skied before. But the great thing about Keystone is that, unlike its more popular and glamorous neighbor, Vail, it has a laid-back, no-pressure vibe. It's perfectly acceptable to spend time away from the slopes; you can easily spend half the day at the spa, take a long nap and then relax over dinner at one of the town's excellent restaurants without feeling any guilt.

On my first day, I decide to ease into snowbound athletics with a few hours



of snowshoeing, which is a great way to see the extraordinary natural beauty of the area. The Keystone Nordic Center gives guided snowshoeing tours to people of all skill levels (there's also the option of just renting equipment and going without a guide) around its nine miles of groomed trails.

With our snowshoes strapped firmly to our feet, our group embarks on a three-mile walk through the four-foot deep snow. The surroundings are utterly out of this world: there are glistening icicles, enormous trees dusted with iridescent powder and a distant, snow-capped mountain range so massive that it's hard to tell where it begins and where it ends. The views are so magnificent I almost forget that I'm actually working up an appetite. Thankfully, the Nordic Center is also home to the Soup Bistro, a cozy café that serves up a variety of hot soups, breads and beverages. I happily fill up on chicken chili and clam chowder before heading back to my condo for a snooze.

Dinner that night is at the restaurant of the Ski Tip Lodge, a former nineteenth-century stagecoach stop that now operates as a bed-and-breakfast. The building is rustic and cozy, with a cabin-like feel and warm, inviting charm. The restaurant offers a rotating, four-course dinner menu that focuses on seasonal ingredients. I start with a beautiful sweet potato ginger purée, a creamy soup that warms me all the way down to my toes. For my main course, I try something I've never had before: yak. It is poached in duck fat and served with a foie gras mousse and pancetta-cheddar grits and a red wine reduction. The meat is tender and surprisingly mild, and the foie gras mousse adds a nice, rich layer of flavor. I also sampled the pheasant breast stuffed with apples and bacon served with caramelized cauliflower-whipped potato and sage butter emulsion.

Sous Chef Kevin McCombs says the focus at the Ski Tip Lodge is about creating comforting fare that is still refined. "We want to offer our guests something hearty and satisfying," he says. "But we don't want to just serve meat and potatoes without any thought put into it."

The next morning starts off with a bit of nerves. Today will be my first ski experience, ever, and I'm anxious but optimistic. From the rental at the Springs Condominium, which happens to be smack-dab in the center of the Keystone River Run ski village, I've

been watching the ski lifts take hundreds of skiers up the mountain, and now it's my turn. So I load up on bagels and coffee at the Inxpot Coffee House, (a hot spot with the locals) and walk over to the Keystone Ski & Ride School for gear and lessons.

After learning how to properly put on boots and skis, I meet my friendly instructor, Andy. Since I can be a bit of a wimp when it comes to heights, we decide to take an enclosed gondola, rather than an open ski lift, up the mountain. Keystone Mountain peaks at 11,444 feet above sea level and has



THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: Snowshoeing works up the appetite; Chef Jason Kassib of Keystone Ranch; Roasted beet salad at Keystone Ranch. OPPOSITE: Keystone Ranch restaurant in the snow.

more than 3,000 acres of bowls, bumps, glades, steeps and groomers for skiers to play on. But since I'm a beginner, I exit the gondola at the bunny slopes. With precise and pleasant instruction from Andy, I manage to pick up the sport fairly quickly, and within an hour I'm skiing down the bunny slopes with ease. After four hours, I'm almost disappointed that our ski time is over, but have worked up an appetite that needs to be addressed. So I hop onto the gondola and head further up the mountain for lunch at the Summit House Food Court, a casual eatery offering quick bites for hungry skiers.

Next, I decide to treat my sore muscles to a massage at the Keystone Lodge & Spa. The spa offers a variety of body and skin treatments, along with a large Jacuzzi and exercise pool. I choose the Marta Kodo Massage, a treatment inspired by traditional Australian Aboriginal methods. The massage is designed to unleash blockages, relieve tension and realign the body's energy with pressure, spiraling movements and a choice of native Aboriginal aromatic oils. It is soothing and tranquil, and afterward I soak in the Jacuzzi to views of the snowy hillsides. It's no wonder many guests choose to spend an entire day here.

That evening, I take the local shuttle van—a convenient method of transport around these parts—to the Keystone Ranch for an evening of fine dining. Situated next to the Keystone Ranch Golf Course, this AAA 4-Diamond establishment serves a six-course dinner featuring wild game specialties created by Executive Chef Jason Kassib. After a salad of chilled baby beets and mixed petite lettuces, I choose the foie gras club. The seared foie gras sits atop a toasted brioche and a prosciutto crisp, and is finished with tomato relish, mâche and a huckleberry gastrique. It goes beautifully with the Cosentino Sangiovese wine.



THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: Coffee is always brewing at the Inxpot Coffee House; A nighttime view of skiers at Keystone.

Because the restaurant is known for wild game, I order accordingly. The New Zealand deer chop served with a blue corn polenta cake and braised elk leg and mushroom ragoût packs a double-whammy of game, and is wonderfully savory and delightful. Though centered around two types of meat that many find intimidating, my meal is well balanced and really highlights the natural, earthy flavors of the game. For dessert, I sit in the parlor downstairs and enjoy the restaurant's famed Grand

Marnier soufflé next to a roaring fireplace—the perfect, cozy retreat on a cold, winter night.

For my final day of the weekend getaway, I stroll around the ski village and explore some of the local shops before heading over to Keystone Lake.

Completely frozen over, the lake is open to ice skaters during the winter-time. I did well with the skiing, but don't feel like pressing my luck on ice skates, so I sit back and enjoy watching the skaters and hockey players while

sipping some cider and taking a quick hike around Keystone before preparing myself for the last night's meal.

Anyone familiar with Colorado cuisine understands what the name "Rocky Mountain oysters" really means. This local delicacy has nothing to do with shellfish; it is a reference to a dish made with a somewhat unappealing part of a cow's anatomy. To be frank, this local favorite is deep-fried bull's testicles, and I couldn't leave Keystone without at least trying them.

Lucky for me, Executive Chef Scott Radek of the Bighorn Steakhouse makes an elegant version of Rocky Mountain oysters that perhaps even the most squeamish palate would be game to try. Flattened, lightly breaded and fried to a golden brown, the "oysters" are served with a crispy vegetable haystack and spicy aioli. The flavor is delicate, almost like a pork cutlet, and the texture is very much like chicken-fried steak. In a word? Delicious.

For my main dish, I bypass the enormous twenty-four ounce "Stockman" cut and instead go for the ten-ounce top sirloin, served with sides of parmesan-roasted garlic herb mashers and the chef's seasonal vegetable choice of sugar snap peas. The meat is perfectly cooked to order and I savor every bite. The meal is simple and substantial and lovely.

As I sip my Pinot Noir and gaze at the winter wonderland outside the window, I'm smitten. Though I may not be the best skier, Keystone is a real food-lover's getaway, offering up cuisine that is both curious and sublime at the same time. What I expected was an adventure on the slopes, but what I got was an eye-opening journey into a whole new world of cuisine.

www.keystone.snow.com

From Chef Scott Radek, Bighorn Steakhouse

GARLIC PARMESAN MASHED POTATOES

SERVES 6

- 2 heads garlic, whole, top sliced off to expose tips of cloves
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 3 pounds Yukon gold potatoes, quartered
- 2 sticks butter
- 1 cup half-and-half
- Salt
- Freshly ground white pepper, to taste
- 1 cup shredded Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese
- ½ cup fresh herbs of choice: parsley, sage, rosemary, thyme, chives, and/or tarragon

1. Preheat oven to 275°F.
2. Coat garlic heads in vegetable oil and wrap in foil. Place in oven and roast 1 hour until completely softened.
3. Removed garlic and unwrap. When cool enough to handle, squeeze garlic from skins and transfer to a blender or food processor. Purée until smooth.
4. Boil potatoes until soft.
5. While potatoes cook, heat butter and half-and-half together in a small saucepan until butter is melted.
6. Drain potatoes and smash with potato masher. Add butter and cream mixture and mash and stir to combine. Season to taste with salt and pepper.
7. Stir in garlic, shredded cheese and herbs. Serve.

APPLE TARTLETS

MAKES 6 TARTLETS

For crust

- 2¾ cups all-purpose flour
- 1 dash kosher salt
- ¼ cup sugar
- 2 sticks salted butter, cold
- 1 egg yolk

For apple filling

- 8 Gala apples, peeled, cored and sliced to ¼ inch

- 1 stick unsalted butter
- ½ cup brown sugar (packed)
- 2 tablespoons rum
- 2 tablespoons apple brandy
- Dash cinnamon
- 1 egg, beaten

To serve

- Vanilla ice cream
- Cinnamon sugar

1. Make crust. Cut butter into cubes.
2. In bowl of a standing mixer fitted with paddle attachment, combine dry ingredients. Add butter and mix until dough almost comes together.
3. Add egg yolk and mix thoroughly.
4. Wrap dough in plastic wrap and refrigerate until ready to use.
5. Preheat oven to 350°F.
6. In a heavy-bottomed saucepan, cook apples and butter over high heat until starting to caramelize.
7. Add brown sugar and liquors and reduce heat to medium. Add cinnamon. Cook until apples are softened and caramelized and liquid is reduced to a syrup.
8. Spoon into 6-ounce ramekins and cool to room temperature.
9. Roll out tart dough to ¼-inch thickness and cut with round cutter to match size of outer edge of ramekin. Top each portion of apples with dough and brush with egg wash.
10. Transfer to oven and bake until crust is cooked and golden, about 12 minutes.
11. Remove from oven and cool slightly. Serve with vanilla ice cream, sprinkling both tart and ice cream with cinnamon sugar.

From Kevin McCombs, the Ski Tip Lodge

SWEET POTATO AND GINGER SOUP

SERVES 4

- 2 large sweet potatoes, peeled and diced
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 1 shallot, minced
- ½ cup chopped onion
- ¼ cup peeled, chopped celeriac
- ½ tablespoon minced fresh ginger

- 2 tablespoons butter
- ¼ cup brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1½ tablespoons molasses
- 3 cups water, plus ¼ cup for slurry
- 1 tablespoon apple cider vinegar
- Juice of ½ lemon
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 1 tablespoon cornstarch
- Salt
- Freshly ground black pepper

1. Combine potatoes, garlic, shallot, onion, celeriac, ginger and butter in a medium saucepan. Cook about 5 minutes on medium heat.
2. Lower heat and add brown sugar, cinnamon and molasses and continue to cook on low heat for 5 minutes more, stirring frequently and being careful not to burn sugar.
3. Add 3 cups water and continue to simmer on low heat for 30 minutes, or until potatoes are tender.
4. Transfer mixture to blender and purée, or use an immersion blender. Return to stove and turn heat to low. Add vinegar, lemon juice and cream. Bring to a simmer.
5. In a small bowl, combine cornstarch and remaining ¼ cup water and mix to make a paste. Add to simmering soup while whisking thoroughly. Adjust to desired consistency by adding more water or continuing to simmer. Season with salt and pepper and serve.

APPLE, BACON, AND BLUE CHEESE-STUFFED PHEASANT

SERVES 6

If you can't find pheasant breasts, try this recipe with organic chicken breasts.

- 6 pheasant breasts
- 2 apples
- 1 teaspoon plus 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- ½ pound bacon, diced
- 3 ounces blue cheese, crumbled

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Wash pheasant breasts and put aside.
2. Peel and core apples, then finely dice. Combine apples in pan with 1 teaspoon oil



ABOVE: Apple, bacon and blue cheese-stuffed pheasant.

- and cook about 5 minutes over medium heat.
3. Cut bacon in a fine dice and cook over medium heat until brown and crispy. Transfer to a paper towel-lined plate.
4. Allow bacon and apples to cool completely and then mix with blue cheese. Set aside.
5. Cut a small hole in thick part of pheasant breast with a boning knife and cut to make a pocket in middle of breast, being careful not to poke through to surface. Using a small spoon or piping bag, divide filling among all breasts.
6. Heat a large skillet over medium heat and add 2 tablespoons oil. Add pheasant breast and sear on all sides until golden brown. Transfer to oven and roast until cooked through, about 10 minutes.

CARAMELIZED CAULIFLOWER-WHIPPED POTATOES

SERVES 6

- ½ head of cauliflower
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 2 large russet potatoes
- ½ cup heavy cream, or to taste
- 2 tablespoons butter
- Salt
- Freshly ground black pepper

1. Cut florets off cauliflower and chop into small pieces. Sauté in oil over very low heat until cauliflower is tender and browned. Set aside.
2. Peel potatoes and boil until tender. Drain

- and pass through a food mill or a ricer.
3. Heat cream and butter in a small saucepan until butter is melted and mixture is warmed through. Add to potato purée and then stir in caramelized cauliflower. Season with salt and pepper to taste and serve.

BROWN BUTTER AND SAGE VINAIGRETTE

MAKES ABOUT 2 CUPS

This elegant sauce is for drizzling over the Apple, Bacon and Blue Cheese-Stuffed Pheasant and Caramelized Cauliflower-Whipped Potatoes.

- 2 sticks butter
- 1 cup warm veal stock
- ½ cup balsamic vinegar
- ½ tablespoon chopped sage
- Salt
- Freshly ground black pepper

1. Place butter in a saucepan and heat over medium until toasty brown. It is best to do this in a porcelain-coated or other light colored pan so you can see the color change. Be careful not to burn butter, just toast. Set aside.
2. Place warm veal stock in blender with vinegar and sage. Blend on low speed while slowly drizzling in browned butter. Be careful not to overwork blender and create too much heat, as this will break your emulsification. Add salt and pepper to taste and serve.