



Restaurateurs Jen Castle and Blake Spalding won the locals over with ice cream. Below: Tequila-lime-marinated chicken.

# Om on the Range

Buddhist owner. Mormon staff. Sound like chaos at the U.N.? Try one of the ziestiest, most innovative—and most tolerant—restaurants in the West. **GRETCHEN REYNOLDS** stumbles on “a slice of heaven” at Hell’s Backbone Grill. ▶



This might be the only restaurant in the world that's hosted both an upright Mormon bishop and a squad of soccer-playing Buddhist monks. Below: Grilled bell peppers from the restaurant's organic garden.

store is hours away, Spalding and her business partner, Jen Castle, 31, scramble daily to create new dishes, depending on what provender they have on hand. That process is eased by their extensive organic gardens and by the locals—sturdy second- and third-generation ranchers who bring by fresh beef, lamb, vegetables, and fruit. The restaurant also trades meals with some of the families, swapping hand-gathered greens for spice-rubbed filet mignon or lemon chiffon cake.

Such harmony seemed almost unthinkable three years ago, when the two women opened the restaurant. Refugees from comparatively cosmopolitan Flagstaff, Arizona, they'd come to Boulder hoping to run an up-to-date organic restaurant according to Buddhist principles. But the town they'd chosen for their business was remote, old-fashioned, insular, and determinedly Mormon. Boulder was the last

town in the lower 48 states to get year-round mail delivery by automobile instead of by mule or horse. (That happened in 1941.) The social life of its 180 citizens revolved around the Mormon church. Boulder's mayor was also that church's bishop. And—a particular handicap for an upscale restaurant—the town didn't allow alcohol to be served at dining establishments.


Spalding and Castle were undeterred. "We wanted to be part of a strong, functioning community," Castle says. "And Boulder was that. We also wanted to learn from local people, to create food that reflected our taste and their taste and our combined tastes. We've done that, I think. But, to be honest, at the beginning it was hard."

WHEN THE WOMEN FIRST LAID EYES on Hell's Backbone Grill (named after a nearby chasm-spanning bridge), the place was dismaying. It stood on the grounds of an inn, the Boulder Mountain Lodge, but the restaurant had been closed for months. Mice had moved in. "It didn't smell good," Spalding says. "It had bad energy." The previous owners had left a legacy of ill will in the community. They sued the town council for a liquor license, and that body, led by staunch Mormons, >

IT'S EVENING IN BOULDER, UTAH, and outside the wraparound windows of Hell's Backbone Grill the sky is fading to a plummy pink. There's a sense of placidity and rural quiet in the town at this hour. But inside the restaurant, all is noise and bustle. Every seat is full. Couples squabble over the remnants of the black-powder biscuits delivered to each table. The air smells of lemons and chile peppers. A young, blonde, unflappable waitress moves from table to table, collecting orders for green-chile posole or tequila-lime-marinated chicken. One of the diners tugs at her sleeve and asks something, and she beckons to Blake Spalding, the 39-year-old woman who co-owns the restaurant. Spalding smiles, knowing that the waitress is being asked how a wine tastes and has no way of knowing the answer. She's Mormon and doesn't drink. Spalding, however, is a practicing Buddhist and enjoys a fine vintage. "I can tell you," she says to the couple, "the Niebaum-Coppola Cabernet is fantastic." The couple orders a bottle. The waitress returns with it and expertly uncorks the wine that she hasn't tried and never will.



The three-year-old Hell's Backbone Grill is an anomaly, an accident of sorts, an unexpected but happy melding of cultures, cuisines, religions, and seemingly opposed ways of life. It has to be the only restaurant in existence to have hosted an upright Mormon bishop and an exuberant squad of soccer-playing Tibetan Buddhist monks. Its menu, lauded by the regional 2002 *Zagat Survey* as "a slice of heaven" in Utah, is seasonal, sprightly, organic, and, to a notable degree, improvisational. Because the nearest large grocery



Castle and her lemon chiffon cake, which earned a blue ribbon at the Coconino County Fair in Flagstaff, Arizona.

refused. The two sides scrapped all the way to the Utah Supreme Court, where, in 1999, the town won. Afterward the restaurant closed. Few in Boulder seemed to mourn. Against this backdrop, Spalding and Castle blithely signed a lease in 2000. Both were used to adverse working conditions. For years Spalding had catered outdoor film and television shoots, helicoptering banquets to the Amazon and cooking feasts deep in the Grand Canyon. She and Castle, who had managed a restaurant in Flagstaff and had also done extensive backcountry cooking, set about fixing up the grill, scrubbing the kitchen, capturing the mice and releasing them to the compost pile (following Buddhist doctrine against unnecessary killing), and asking Tibetan monks from Atlanta to bless the space. Spalding hung Buddhist prayer flags along the outdoor patio. Then the two women stepped back, sighed happily, and prepared to open for business. They advertised for waitstaff.

Absolutely no one from town responded. "It's never easy for newcomers to be accepted into a small town like

Boulder. I remember," says Judi Davis, the postmistress, who has lived there for 33 years. "Plus there was still resentment toward the restaurant because of what had happened before. No one was rushing over to say welcome."

Spalding and Castle were devastated. "We thought, *They don't like us*," Castle says, looking stricken as she recalls those days. Spalding was equally distraught, tearing up at the post office one day. Judi Davis took pity on her, patted her curly brown hair, promised things would get better, and, most important, encouraged her own youngest daughter to apply for a job. Jennifer Davis became the restaurant's first local hire.

But the town didn't fully thaw toward the newcomers until the following Fourth of July, after Castle, a born party planner, had an inspiration. "I thought: *I love ice cream. I love being social. Let's have an ice cream social.*" Almost shyly, the women put up flyers around town, inviting one and all, then fretted. "We bought all this ice cream," Spalding recalls. "But we had no idea if anyone would come." They did. Curious (and →

## Lemon Chiffon Cake

### Cake:

2 cups flour  
 1½ cups sugar  
 1 Tbsp. baking powder  
 1 tsp. salt  
 ½ cup water  
 7 egg yolks  
 ½ cup vegetable oil  
 Grated zest of 2 lemons  
 2 tsp. vanilla  
 8 egg whites  
 ¼ tsp. cream of tartar

### Icing:

1½ cups confectioners' sugar  
 2 Tbsp. plus 1 tsp. fresh lemon juice  
 2 Tbsp. melted butter  
 1 tsp. grated lemon zest

1. To make the cake: Preheat the oven to 325°. In a large bowl, combine the flour, sugar, baking powder, and salt. Make a well in the center; add the water, egg yolks, oil, lemon zest, and vanilla. Whisk the dry ingredients into the yolk mixture until the batter is blended and smooth. Set aside.

2. In a large mixer bowl, beat the egg whites and the cream of tartar at medium-low speed until foamy. Gradually increase the speed to high and beat the whites until stiff (but not dry) peaks form. Gently fold ½ of the beaten whites into the batter with a rubber spatula just until blended. Fold in the remaining whites just until combined. Pour the batter into an ungreased 10-inch tube pan.

3. Bake 1 hour, or until the top springs back when lightly touched with a fingertip and a cake tester inserted into the center comes out clean. Immediately invert the cake, still in the pan, onto the neck of a wine bottle or a large funnel. Cool completely.

4. To make the icing: In a medium bowl, whisk together the ingredients until smooth.

5. Remove the cake pan from the bottle. Run a long thin knife around both edges of the cake pan. Invert the cake onto a serving plate and remove the pan. Spread the icing on top of the cake, allowing some of the glaze to drip down the sides. Makes 12 to 16 servings.

hungry), almost everyone showed up. Drum after drum of ice cream disappeared. Children danced on the lawn. "Afterward," Spalding says, "the mayor came over and told us that that was probably the first time he'd seen so many of the townspeople together."

From then on, congeniality reigned. The restaurant hired additional staff, Mormons as well as a local Hispanic woman, a cook. All swapped recipes: freezer jam, tamales, Spalding's great-great-grandmother's oatmeal bread. Most of these have been featured on the Hell's Backbone menu. The groups also parceled out cultural tidbits.

"People asked about Buddhism," Spalding says. "I'd tell them it's about compassion and responsibility, about striving to be the kindest person you can be." In return she and Castle became intimately acquainted with Mormonism. "It's embarrassing," Castle says, "but I just had to ask about the undergarments," sacred clothing that devout Mormons wear. Obliging, the waitresses explained. A few months later, these

### Spalding had wine sniffings, as opposed to tastings, for Mormon staff.

same women settled on the grill's grassy lawn to watch visiting Buddhist monks yak-blance (a ceremony re-creating the allegorical story of how monks, with the help of a magical bird, discovered the yak). "This place has been an education for all of us," Spalding says.

The crowning moment for her and Castle came last year, when the town council surveyed the citizenry about liquor licenses, and, to the surprise of almost everyone, a majority agreed to grant them. The first license ever issued in Boulder, Utah, went to Hell's Backbone Grill. "We were humbled and pleased," Spalding says. They also were unprepared, and had to drive to a convenience store to buy beer to serve that night. (In deference to local wishes, the grill serves only beer and wine, although it has a full liquor license.) Later Spalding organized wine sniffings—as opposed to tastings—for her Mormon staff, teaching them to decant and discuss vintages.

"It sounds hokey," Spalding says, "but this restaurant has become a testament to the power of acceptance and love. I've worked in unhappy kitchens. The bitterness shows up in the food. It really does. But here we're always laughing now and singing and teaching each other new recipes. By the time we're through, the food is incredible. It's filled with joy."

She's standing in a corner of the dining room as she says this, smiling in an inward way. A clot of waiting diners mills near the door. The restaurant's reputation keeps growing, thanks to newspaper reviews and word of mouth. "Shhh. Listen," she says, pointing to where Jennifer Davis waits on an urbane-looking pair.

"With the trout, sir," Davis is saying, "might I suggest the Frog's Leap Sauvignon Blanc?" Spalding grins. As they both know, it smells wonderful. •

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*Gretchen Reynolds is a writer in Santa Fe.*