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## One Kitchen, Two Cultures

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BOULDER -- A spring howler is grinding red rock into sand right before your eyes. The town of Boulder seems to be moving at the pace of the 40 mph wind. You can see the trees touching their toes through the windows of the Hell's Backbone Grill. Inside, sous-chef/bookkeeper/manager/waiter Moki is moving at his own equally mad pace. The board of trustees from St. Mark's Hospital is driving down from Salt Lake City tonight for a retreat and the cafe will be full.

This is a big night at Hell's Backbone. Just three years ago, Blake Campbell and Jen Castle moved here from Flagstaff, Ariz., to take over operation of the restaurant on the grounds of Boulder Mountain Lodge. Their idealistic mission: to serve organic, locally produced food in this desert town on the edge of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. Even more idealistically, the women wanted their restaurant to become part of the hardscrabble pioneer community.

"We didn't want this to be just a tourist stop," says Castle. "We wanted to be the place people came for Mother's Day and Easter and prom night."

They didn't realize that to do that, they would have to become cultural pioneers themselves. To establish Hell's Backbone (the name of a nearby rock ridge), Campbell and Castle, both Buddhists, had to staff and stock a restaurant in the middle of nowhere, as well as learn the ways and become part of the tiny, mostly Mormon town. There were plenty of skeptics: " 'You won't be able to buy local, you can't make it all from scratch, you won't be able to hire locals, your prices are too high' -- all the local restaurant owners and even the lodge management said we couldn't do it," says Campbell. But this year, through gentle persistence, hard work and the power of good food, Campbell and Castle seem close to fulfilling their dream.

"When we first got here, we were very excited about being good employers in the community," recalls Campbell. "We hung out our 'help wanted' signs and no one came."

The first year the Grill never had enough employees, instead depending on friends who came to visit and were coerced to stay and work for a few months. (That explains Moki, Castle's uncle, aka Mark Michnovicz.) But Jennifer Davis, the only local to accept a job

at the Grill, came back for a second season; then her sister Stacy, a music teacher in Escalante, joined on for the summer.

"Most of our people had never worked as cooks or waiters, so we had to train everyone from the beginning," says Campbell. "It's exhausting and a big energy investment." An investment that paid off: This year, every one of last year's employees returned to work at Hell's Backbone.

"When I was little, you were either lost or you lived here. If you saw a vehicle you didn't recognize, you knew someone had bought a new car," recalls Stacy Davis.

For 100 years, Boulder existed as an agriculture-based community. The decline of that way of life was accelerated in 1996 by the creation of the Grand Staircase- Escalante National Monument.

"Lots of people in town saw the building of Boulder Mountain Lodge as a threat to our way of life," says Davis. "I was in high school before there were any restaurants in Boulder. Just the menu at the Grill, serving local, organic food, seemed weird because people in Boulder had always raised their own vegetables and chickens. Why would you charge more for doing that? People in Boulder were a little leery -- they didn't know if Blake and Jen would be respectful of the culture that existed here."

Campbell and Castle were counting on food to bridge cultural gaps. They broke the ice with ice cream. Even before the Grill was officially in business, they would show up at town functions, bringing food. Then, on the Fourth of July, they held an ice cream social and invited the whole town.

"We just put up fliers everywhere and asked people to spread the word." Bring your favorite homemade toppings, the fliers said. The Grill bought gallons of ice cream.

"We honestly didn't know if anyone would show up or not," recalls Campbell. "We were so nervous." It turned out the whole town, including the mayor, came to the party. The Grill overflowed with people and everyone stayed for an evening fireworks show.

"I've never seen so many townspeople in one place before," the mayor told Campbell. Now the gathering is well on its way to becoming a town tradition following the annual parade, in which the Hell's Backbone Grill's hula team -- led by Campbell and Castle -- marches.

New Utah Cuisine: In the kitchen, Castle and her crew are assembling the first course of the St. Mark's dinner. The Grill's signature salad of organic greens, topped with sliced

strawberries and a smattering of toasted corn kernels, is tossed in garlic balsamic vinaigrette with cracklings of smoked bacon. It's a dish typical of what Castle and Campbell call "new Utah cuisine," or "new cooking from the Old West." A Zuni woman taught them how to make corn cakes over cress with peppers. Brown butter biscuits are served with fresh sage butter.

"This food is not grounded in history," explains Campbell. "But it is rooted in the region."

Boulder is a long way from Berkeley, Calif., where Alice Waters pioneered American regional food at Chez Panisse. But the Grill follows the famous chef's precepts. "We try to find what we need right here," says Campbell. "We're interested in investing in the community, in supporting the local economy and businesses."

They express that interest by offering locals a 20 percent discount when they eat at the Grill. And also by buying their eggs -- not to mention beef, lamb, chicken and vegetables. Campbell and Castle share a strong Earth-to-table philosophy and look locally first for foodstuffs. Many of the local gardens meet the Grill's organic standards.

One woman trades her greens for breakfast. Springhill Farm, just up the road from Hell's Backbone, is a state-certified organic operation and doesn't graze its cattle on public lands, so Castle buys her beef there. Lamb comes from Bown's Ranch, also local, where they don't administer hormones and grow their own feed. She buys produce from a certified organic farm in Caineville as well as from local gardeners, and they tend their own organic vegetable and herb gardens and orchards. This is common ground for the Buddhists and their Mormon neighbors.

"I love the Mormon culture," says Campbell. "It works especially well in a rural setting. Of course that's what it was designed for."

Before coming to Hell's Backbone, Campbell, a self-trained cook, ran a business called The Gilded Chile that specialized in catering for film crews on location in remote places. "I've catered in the Grand Canyon and the Amazon rainforest. If it seemed impossible they'd call me. I was set up for doing the impossible," she says.

So the prospect of procuring fresh foodstuffs in a remote place like Boulder didn't faze her. Castle also had been a backcountry cook trained in ingenuity. Before she developed solid local sources, she relied on purveyors in Arizona. One agreed to deliver via UPS for free. Another delivers by truck, at least part of the way.

"Of course I still have to drive two hours to the junction at Bryce Canyon to pick it up

and I can only pick up a carload," she says, but again, cooperation with locals helps. Hell's Backbone now co-orders with area businesses, including the convenience store. Equipment is a bigger headache. "You don't just get things fixed around here," sighs Castle, as she wrestles with a pair of balky ovens on the big night.

**Cultural Challenges:** Other challenges found solutions: Hell's Backbone Grill was the first place to serve a beer with a meal, ever, in the city of Boulder. Now Campbell estimates that 90 percent of their customers order beer or wine.

But many of the wait staff are members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and non-drinkers, and the few drinkers had never opened a bottle of wine. Everyone attended a wine seminar to learn how to answer customer questions. But instead of the usual swish, sniff and sip required at educational wine-tastings, Mormon waitresses stopped at the sniff, learning to differentiate chardonnay from riesling by the nose. The staff at Hell's Backbone is a mix of Buddhist and Mormon, Latino and white. Kitchen confidential here is cultural sharing -- how to make tamales, what is the significance of Mormon garments, what do Tibetan monks like to eat.

"We're all going to see 'Singles Ward' together," Campbell says. "They said, 'You'll see what it's like to be Mormon and single.' "

**A Rush of Success:** By 10, the St. Mark's party has peaked. Carol Stanclift, who arranged the retreat in Boulder for the second year straight, is taking it slow with some strawberry shortcake.

"Everyone liked it so much, they demanded to come back this year. Because they love the food -- you don't find fresh homegrown food like this many places."

Castle, bleary-eyed, finally emerges from the kitchen and she and Campbell take a break in the dining room, sharing a comforting bowl of hot, buttered butterfly pasta. There's still tomorrow's breakfast prep to do -- coffee cakes to bake in the temperamental oven - - but tonight was a success.

"I'm exhausted," says Castle. "But it's nothing a bowl of noodles won't fix."