

CITYWEEKLY

[Click To Print](#)

RESTAURANT REVIEWS

Hell's Backbone Grill: Restaurant Of The Year

Seasonal Boulder Spot Offers Utah's Best Dining

By [Ted Scheffler](#)



POSTED // DECEMBER 26, 2013 -

I enjoyed many memorable meals during 2013. Some were at restaurants here in Utah, and some were in cities like New York, Philadelphia and others. However, when I look back over the past 12 months, my finest dining experiences took place well off the beaten path: in Boulder, Utah. I'm talking, of course, about Hell's Backbone Grill.

Before you rush to make a reservation, please take note that Hell's Backbone Grill is a seasonal restaurant, open from mid-March to early December. Maybe that's one of the things that make Hell's Backbone Grill so special: The staff gets a yearly respite from the grind of doing breakfast, lunch, dinner and picnic/hike meals seven days a week, serving food made almost exclusively from scratch. The owners and staff have time to rejuvenate. And, well, I

doubt you'd care to navigate the gorgeous—but treacherous in winter—36 miles of mountainous, winding Highway 12 to the restaurant in January or February.

Located about four hours south of Salt Lake City and enveloped by the grounds of the rustic Boulder Mountain Lodge, Hell's Backbone Grill is a magical place. In my opinion, it's Utah's Chez Panisse, a restaurant where the vast majority of the food comes from Hell's Backbone's "no-harm" organic farm, which produces some 12,000 pounds of produce annually, not to mention breakfast eggs from 130 heritage-breed hens, 75 heirloom fruit trees, grass-fed local beef, lamb and more. The organic farm is worked with sustainability in mind, and with what owners Blake Spalding and Jennifer Castle call "Buddhist values of right livelihood." Even weeding is done by hand and by two rescue goats. As you stroll up the stone steps to the restaurant, you'll notice Tibetan prayer flags encircling the exterior.

But don't worry; Hell's Backbone Grill is a warm and welcoming place—a fun and festive one. It's not pretentious or *serious*, and you don't need a secret mantra to get in the door. Spalding is usually in the dining room, chatting with customers and greeting both old and new ones with the same welcoming hug.

From local ranchers to visiting rock stars, everyone gets the same affectionate treatment. Castle tends to spend most of her time in the kitchen, making sure every dish is done just right.

And, after all, when all is said and done, it's the *food* that makes this my favorite Utah restaurant. The meals I've had here were nothing less than exceptional.

Dinner begins with warm "blue ribbon" buttermilk biscuits. When living in Flagstaff, Ariz., Jen won a blue ribbon for her biscuits at the Coconino County Fair. Black pepper is one secret of these amazing biscuits, which are served with freshly whipped butter spiked with snipped sage. It's a helluva way to start a meal.

And so is an order of Zuni sweet-potato skillet cakes—so simple, yet so satisfying. Sweet potato is mashed and mixed with honey, water, cornmeal and salt, then formed into patties and skillet-fried. Hearty potato-cheese soup with bacon and chives (\$8), or fried green farm tomatoes with Castle's red-chile ranch sauce (\$9) are also sensational starters. Castle grew up in New Mexico, so you'll find that red chiles liberally pepper the Hell's Backbone menu. Since New Mexican cooking is one of my favorites, it's little wonder that I love this place so much.

Speaking of New Mexico, the *posole* at Hell's Backbone is something I could eat daily. Sometimes they make it with traditional pork, sometimes with lamb; there's even a black bean and butternut squash version (\$17). If you've never tried *posole*, you're in for a treat. Castle's "Christmas" *posole* (a traditional New Mexico holiday supper) is a "stew" made with hominy, tender pork shoulder, onions, celery, garlic, herbs, spices and, most importantly, a rich, zesty red-chile sauce. The portions are so generous that I asked Spalding if she wouldn't mind packing up my leftover *posole* to take home. She graciously offered to freeze it for me so it would keep for the drive back north. And it's even better as leftovers!

Every server at the restaurant is well-trained in food & wine pairings, and there's a very well-chosen wine selection. If manager/sommelier Victor Van Keuren is on duty when you visit, be sure to put his wine expertise to use. Like everybody else at Hell's Backbone Grill, he makes you feel like family, whether it's your first visit or your 50th. A glass of Simonnet-Febvre Chablis worked nicely with a beautiful blue-corn-cruste skillet-fried trout with molasses and walnuts, served with brown rice pilaf and scrumptious roasted veggies alongside (\$26).

I enjoyed many more outstanding dishes—the organic chicken & dumpling potpie comes to mind—but none more than a breakfast of chile-migas (\$12). It's another nod to New Mexico: a plate piled high with scrambled fresh farm eggs tossed with blue-corn tortilla chips, jack cheese, and Castle's hot-as-hell red-chile sauce. It comes with a side of yummy pinto beans and freshly made flour tortillas. I've never had a better breakfast.

I asked Spalding if she'd ever thought of opening a restaurant in Salt Lake City; she did help develop the menu and dishes for Frida Bistro during the off-season from Hell's Backbone. But, even if you could transplant the Hell's Backbone food to SLC, it would be impossible to re-create the space here. I think that's because, like an antique that's been lovingly cared for, this is a restaurant that, over the years, has accumulated layer upon layer of love, compassion and care. It's my favorite restaurant of 2013—and one that's well worth an excursion to Boulder.

HELL'S BACKBONE GRILL
20 N. Highway 12, Boulder
435-335-7464
HellsBackboneGrill.com