

The New York Times

Archives

AT THE NATION'S TABLE; This Cafe's a Far Sight, but Fans Say It's Worth the Hike

By MINDY SINK
Published: April 21, 2004

IT is certainly worth driving the twisting back roads of southern Utah to explore the vast wilderness of its national parks and monuments. But it sure seems a long way to go for a meal.

For the last couple of years, though, travelers have been following the breathtaking trail to Hell's Backbone Grill in this tiny canyon-land hamlet.

"Its the one-two punch," said Blake Spalding, one of the owners of the restaurant. "People come for the scenery and get this great food, or they come for the food and can enjoy the scenery too."

As Ms. Spalding spoke, two couples from California stopped by her table to thank her for dinner before they started their one and a half hour drive back to the town where they were staying.

Sean O'Malley, who lives in Jackson, Wyo., has been to Hell's Backbone Grill quite a few times. Last Thanksgiving he and his wife, Mia, drove to Park City, Utah, where they gathered up his brother Michael O'Malley and his wife, Lauren, and their two sons to enjoy their holiday meal at the Grill. (The restaurant is closed from October to March, except for Thanksgiving.)

"It is so unexpected to come across this oasis in the high slick-rock desert of Southern Utah," Mr. O'Malley said. "It is a perfect one- to two-day stopover on the way to hiking in Zion or biking in Moab."

The restaurant, whose ever-changing menu describes its cooking as a blend of Western Range, Pueblo Indian and Southwestern, opened four years ago on the grounds of the Boulder Mountain Lodge along Scenic Byway 12. In the pioneering spirit that has shaped the West, Ms. Spalding and her business partner, Jennifer Castle, came here hoping that the predominantly Mormon community would not only accept them, but support them. (Ms. Spalding has studied Tibetan Buddhism and the cafe is adorned with Tibetan prayer flags and a small Buddha statue.)

"Hell's Backbone is the name of a bridge near here and I wanted that to symbolize a bridge with the community," Ms. Spalding said. "It took some work, but we've integrated."

The Grill relies on local farmers and ranchers for everything, including honey and beef, and Ms. Spalding and Ms. Castle have planted their own organic vegetable and herb garden to round out the menu.

"I know place-based food has become this buzzword or phrase," Ms. Spalding said. "But out here, we have to be place-based because we can't just run out to the store."

On a recent chilly night in March, for example, the two women fretted over the possibility of a hard freeze that could wipe out their apricot trees -- which provide a staple of their summer menu.

One sign that they were accepted in the community was when they won a liquor license. On the beer and wine list is Polygamy Porter, a beer that pokes fun of the state's reputation for plural marriages.

Hell's Backbone Grill is open daily, and serves three meals a day, including preordered takeout lunches for hikers; (435) 335-7464 or www.hellsbackbonegrill.com. A book by the restaurateurs, "With a Measure of Grace: The Stories and Recipes of a Small Town Restaurant," is to be published this summer.

[Home](#) | [Times topics](#) |

[Member Center](#)

[Copyright 2011](#) [The New York Times Company](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#) |

[Index by Keyword](#)