



Aspen's Downvalley Dining

The Aspen dining scene is going downhill—in a good way. An enticing, expanding array of restaurants has started to attract skiers downvalley, away from the city's traditional epicenter of gourmet glitz. / By Linda Hayes / Photography by Mark Wagoner

WHETHER YOU'RE POWDER SKIING OR power dining, Aspen is extreme. This winter, what you'll find on the end of your fork includes a particularly eclectic collection of tasty morsels from a variety of restaurants—but not all of these are in Aspen, where you'd expect to find them.

Nevertheless, in-town favorites continue to please, such as Campo de Fiori, with plump wild mushroom ravioli and filet mignon rubbed with rosemary and garlic. And at Montagna, live-wire chef Ryan Hardy continues to turn out seasonally inspired dishes (not to mention his homemade cheese and charcuterie).

There's a rash of newcomers, as well.

At DishAspen, for instance, Matt Zubrod dishes up lobster corn dogs and duck confit. Dena Marino pleases palates with wild boar and osso buco at D19. And the Elgin sausage and pork spare ribs are smoky and sweet at David Edgar's Texas Red's BBQ.

That said, the latest quest for local flavor is fast heading in a different direction—down the Roaring Fork Valley (“downvalley,” in local lingo) along State Highway 82, toward the burgeoning little towns and communities that sit 20 to 30 minutes outside of Aspen.

What gives? “It's more affordable down here than up in Aspen,” says Mark Fischer, whose SIX89 and Phat Thai restaurants in Carbondale have earned him national acclaim. “There's historic character and charm, and now, with current economies bringing

people down here, these little towns are segueing into something amenable to everyone, including second-home owners.”

It's part dining trend, part development trend. Whatever you call it, fine restaurants, talented chefs, and creative menus are turning downvalley towns into minidestinations for hungry skiers.

Dogwood Grill / The scenic 20-minute drive from Aspen to the sultry Dogwood Grill will give you time to work up a hunger for owner-chef Joseph Munoz's inspired cuisine, which adds a decidedly Southern accent to the valley's culinary mix.

Munoz, who spent years in high-profile Aspen restaurants, including The Wild Fig, Range, and Rustique, forayed into Basalt in 2003 with a former partner. With a “build it and they will come” phi-

losophy and a penchant for small-town life, Munoz says, “We did some research and decided that the time was right for a chef-driven restaurant with a specific genre of quality cuisine.” ▶

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Going Up

Aspen ups its own ante at these popular restaurants.

Campo de Fiori / 205 South Mill Street. Dinner nightly from 5 p.m. Tel: 970-920-7717

Montagna / 675 East Durant Street. Closes at 9 p.m. Tel: 970-920-6313

DishAspen / 430 East Hyman Avenue. Dinner served daily 5 p.m.–10 p.m. Tel: 970-925-7119

D19 / 305 South Mill Street. Lunch served 11:30 a.m.–3 p.m., dinner from 5:30 p.m. Tel: 970-925-6019

Texas Red's BBQ / 520 East Cooper Avenue. Open 11 a.m.–11 p.m. Tel: 970-920-7754



Try Aspen's most delicious

recipes, including braised lamb shanks, Mexican chile truffles, and lobster pot pie. Go to hemispheresmagazine.com and click Cyber Sidebar.

Atmosphere abounds in the restaurant's modern Low Country décor, which features scarlet walls, palmetto-leaf ceiling fans, and walls adorned with oversize paintings (magnolia blossoms, a flowering dogwood tree) by local artist Thea Bent. Up front, you can stop at the blond-wood bar for a chilled sweet-tea martini or a Havana breeze cocktail before settling down at a table or a plush, cushioned banquette—most of which allow a peek through to the partially open kitchen.

Signature dishes include shrimp and

Anson Mills stone-ground grits in a sherry pan sauce, skillet-fried buttermilk chicken laced with tasso gravy, and pork tenderloin with crispy collard greens. The fried okra and sweet potato fries are a must.

305 Gold Rivers Court, Basalt. Open nightly from 5:30 for dinner. Tel: 970-927-4000 or dogwoodgrill.com

Zheng Asian Bistro / "It's a neighborhood bistro with an Asian menu," says Mike Mercatoris of Zheng Asian Bistro, which has established itself as a local treasure since it opened four years ago.

Mercatoris got his start at his uncle's restaurant, Mountain Dragon, a casual spot in Snowmass Village that catered to visitors and Snowmass Mountain skiers. For the El Jebel restaurant's regular clientele of second-home owners and local families (most of whom seem to know each other), he incorporated reclaimed timber and Asian artwork and positioned a bar at the entry. He recruited co-owner, restaurant namesake, and Culinary Institute of America-trained chef Ming "Henry" Zheng for the kitchen.

The bistro's goal is to offer a variety of tastes. "Zheng is different from most Chinese restaurants," Zheng says.

"We like to play with new ideas, mix ingredients," Mercatoris adds. "The food's not pigeonholed into just Chinese or Thai. We break some rules and have some fun."

"Fun" comes in flavorful dishes such as steamed shrimp tossed in coconut sauce; tempura-style whole rainbow trout with tamarind and ginger; Chinese-style crispy duck that diners wrap in mushi pancakes; rice-noodle pancakes topped with shrimp, scallops, and lobster; and Singapore noodles tossed in madras yellow curry. Nightly specials and customized combos spice things up and give the chef a chance to flex his culinary muscles and keep things fresh.

400 East Valley Road, El Jebel. Open daily for dinner at 5 p.m. (4:30 p.m. for takeout). Tel: 970-963-8077

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*** BOARDING PASS / Get Down / To get down valley, just look up: United Express has the most nonstop flights to Aspen (ASE), with 13 daily from Denver, one from Los Angeles, and (beginning last month) two from Chicago, as well as service three days a week from San Francisco. Most flights feature exclusivity, with first class and Economy Plus.



El Korita / Every night is a fiesta at El Korita. Jot down your name on the pad at the front counter if there's a wait, which is well worth enduring for some of the best and most authentic Mexican food in the valley.

Owner-chef Beto Gamboa learned the restaurant business in Aspen at Pour La France, the Motherlode, and Su Casa. When it came time to open his own place, the location just doors from the local multiplex made perfect sense. The setting is bold and colorful with brightly painted booths and tables, Mexican pennants, hats, and serapes hanging from the walls and ceiling, and lively serenades on the jukebox.

Servers hustle with plates of traditional fare inspired by Gamboa's hometown in the Mexican state of Nayarit, much of which is seafood, including shrimp or octopus ceviche, whole grilled tilapia, and a selection of shrimp dishes that can really pack some heat. House specials include a saucy seafood or beef dish served in a *molcajete*, carnitas with *charros* and

guacamole, and *carne asade* topped with shrimp sauce. There are *tortas*, enchiladas, and chiles rellenos, too. Pair them with margaritas on the rocks or Coronitas.

19218 State Highway 82, Carbondale.
Open daily 11 a.m.–10 p.m. Tel: 970-963-4600

SIX89 / According to SIX89's menu lexicon, *gremolata* is "an aromatic garnish of chopped parsley, lemon, and garlic with extra-virgin olive oil"; pecorino is an "aromatic sheep's milk cheese"; and cell phones "should be maintained in the 'off' position." Owner-chef Fischer says the lexicon is a perfect example of the user-friendly concept of his restaurant.

Set in a refurbished turn-of-the-century arts and crafts-style house, the place is comfortable and welcoming, with a pair of intimate dining rooms, one of which features a glassed-in wall of wine. The restaurant's selection is overseen by wine director Bill Bentley. There are also warm wooden floors, mahogany trim, and a friendly lounge with a zinc-topped bar and a few high tables.

The seasonal menu showcases the efforts of local farmers and producers served on dishware crafted by local artisans. Long-standing favorites include crisp chèvre gnocchi salad, "badly cut" *pappardelle* with French feta and roasted tomatoes, grilled Colorado lamb loin chops with sweet-smoky achiote barbecue sauce, and pan-roasted Angus fillet and lobster tater tots.

Can't decide? Go for the "Random Acts of Cooking"—family-style servings of whatever Fischer feels like preparing. "When we first opened, people who knew our food would say 'just cook for us,'" he explains. "Random Acts gives people, and the kitchen, the chance to experiment and have fun."

689 Main Street, Carbondale. Open Tuesday–Sunday from 5:30 p.m.
Tel: 970-963-6890 or six89.com

Linda Hayes is a regular contributor to HEMISPHERES. She also writes about cuisine, travel, and luxury lifestyle for *Ski and Elle Decor*.

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