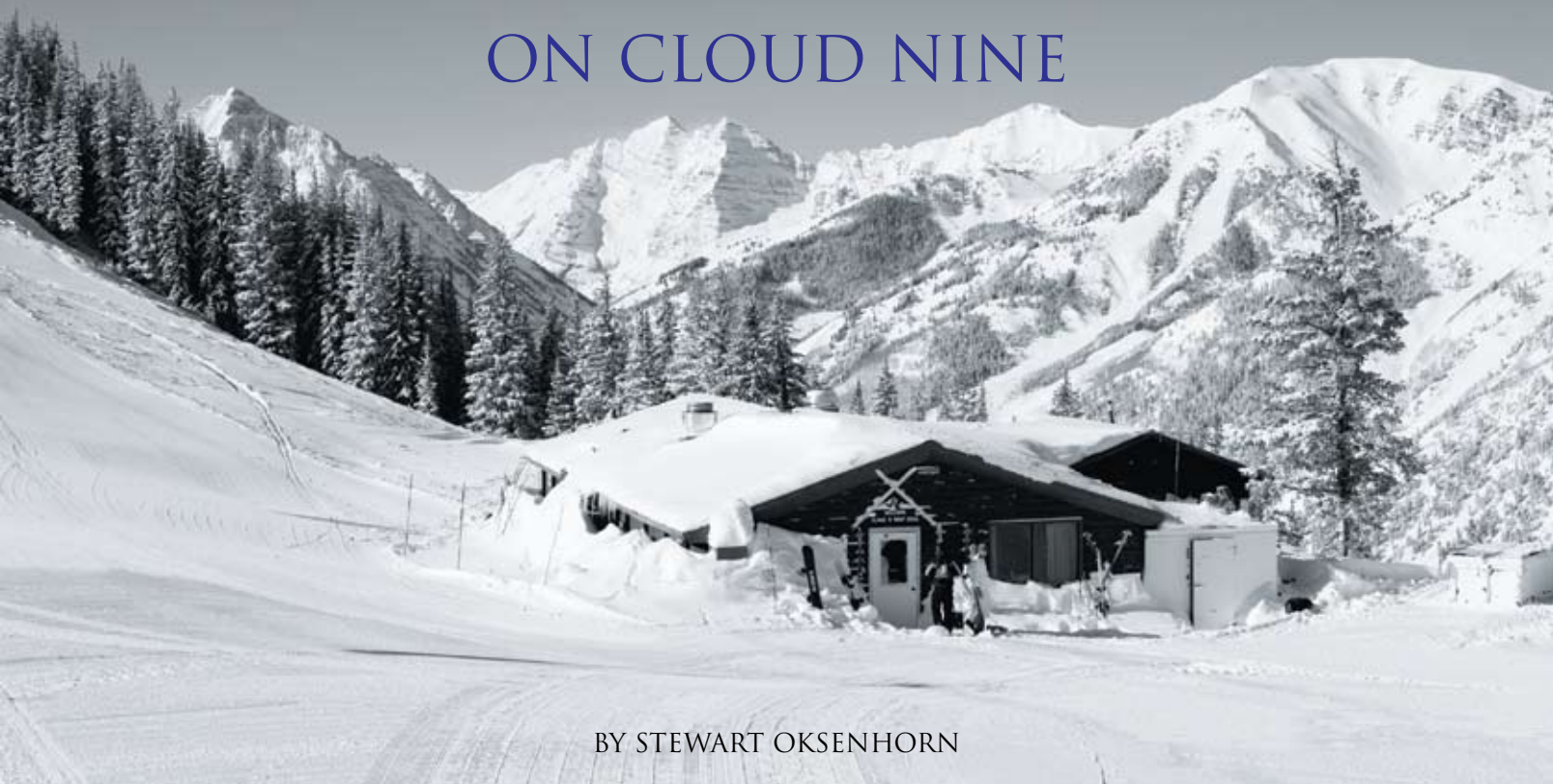


EDIBLE TRADITIONS ON CLOUD NINE



BY STEWART OKSENHORN

In the earliest part of its existence, Cloud Nine Alpine Bistro could not have been more different than what it has become. The original building, perched at the top of the Cloud Nine lift (elevation 10,740 feet) at the Aspen Highlands ski area, was built as a restaurant in 1960 by Highland's first owner, Whip Jones, but it burned down three years later. In the early '70s, it was rebuilt as a ski patrol shack on the north side and a tiny wine-and-cheese picnic spot on the south side, which faces the Maroon Bells. It was a casual place, so informal, in fact, that Jones allowed ski patrollers to run the wine-and-cheese operation during the 1981-82 season. "It was like putting the fox in the hen house and locking the hen house," laughs Mac Smith, current head of Highland's ski patrol. "You put patrollers in a place with a bunch of wine?" One can only imagine.

As years went by, the menu changed, but the concept was the same. Food service was barebones—a soup, a salad, a dish or two each day. It was intended for convenience—to get skiers quickly back out on the snow—and not as a genuine dining experience.

The transformation of the spot could serve as the poster child for the Slow Food movement. What was once an in-and-out refueling stop is now possibly the coziest, most Old World dining experience in Aspen. The restaurant seduces visitors into slowing down and recognizing the value of giving a meal its proper time and its place of respect in the order of a day, in a life.

"It's not a grab-and-go place," says Andreas Fischbacher, who has been the chef and general manager of Cloud Nine since its inception as a bistro eight years ago.

Fischbacher grew up knowing the importance of food. Raised in the Viennese forest between Vienna and Salzburg, his huge extended family

often lived together, and mealtime was at the center of the household. There was a vegetable garden and livestock; often, all three daily meals were prepared without a moment of shopping. "Food was always a big deal," says Fischbacher.

So when Fischbacher's high school instituted a test program of boys' cooking classes, he jumped to participate. It put him on a career track that included training in food and beverage management training and an apprenticeship at a Viennese restaurant. Among the most valuable experiences in the apprenticeship was in the restaurant's sister businesses: a pair of on-mountain dining establishments in the Austrian Alps. Those Alpine spots taught Fischbacher the logistics of running a ski-area restaurant—even if, back then, it was horses, not SnoCats and ski lifts, hauling the gear up the slopes.

The menu at Cloud Nine that Fischbacher has concocted is pan-Alpine rather than strictly Austrian. Favorite dishes include elk osso bucco, ratatouille, cheese fondue and an elk ragout with napkin dumplings. The wine list is small but worldly; the atmosphere is a continent removed from the standard burger-and-fries ski café. Skiers relax on the deck with a glass of wine or take time out for a full-service meal. And there is a slice of Colorado, too: Fischbacher and his staff use meat from the local Milagro Ranch, and he also cans produce—peaches, tomatoes, plums—for winter use. Cloud Nine has become such a heavenly place that the restaurant opens Thursday nights for dinner—diners are brought up by SnoCat and warmed with hot chocolate—and is available for private parties.

"It's the European idea. People want to ski hard, then sit down, have a good meal, a glass of wine. Great service," says Fischbacher. "It cannot be more European than it is." ❧