

WHAT A LONG TASTE TRIP IT'S BEEN!

BY JOHN LEHNDORFF

Once upon a time, the Front Range was on the back burner when it came to food. As I pulled into Boulder in the back of a pickup truck, the city was a mecca for hippies, folk-rock musicians, scientists and other seekers—not chefs.

It was June in the bicentennial year, 1976. As I hopped out at 12th and Pearl in front of Shannon's bar, there was nary a foodie to be seen on the Downtown Mall. That's because we were still called "gourmets" then, and mall construction had begun only weeks before.

It hard to overstate how fundamentally Colorado's edible landscape has changed in those 33 years, and just how much we now take for granted. Yet that was the moment in time when the seeds of that transformation were being planted.

Imagine, if you can, an era when sushi bars did not sit on every corner. You could order espresso only at Italian restaurants. There were no Starbucks or coffee roasters or cafés or tea houses. Perhaps there was one Vietnamese and one Thai restaurant in the entire state, but you'd find no salad bars, goat cheese makers, or chai brewers, and a sparse handful of good bakeries.

In 1976, no Master Wine Sommeliers offered advice at cool bistros. There were no wine-specific stores and people would have laughed if you'd asked for a great Colorado wine. The Colorado beer was Coors, a regional favorite so sought after visitors packed it in ice to drive across the country. Great beer was imported.

We did not spend Saturday mornings at the farmers' markets because there were none. Farmers were growing notable produce, but the chiles, melons, sweet corn, potatoes and cherries were mainly sold at farm stands and occasionally to grocery stores like Ideal Market. There were only a couple of tiny natural food stores, and local grocery shopping opportunities were quite limited.



Restaurant critic John Lehndorff incognito.

Photo by Charlie Roy

During the Carter administration, few cooking classes were taught along the Front Range. We enjoyed the occasional farm town harvest celebrations, but food, wine or beer festivals were notable for their absence. Brunch was about to be invented.

To give younger readers a little context, at this time before the millennium nobody had cell phones, iPods, CDs, websites, personal computers, cable TV or extra-virgin olive oil. The only food shows aired on public television. No, dinosaurs did *not* still roam through Littleton.

I had only meant to drop in on Colorado for a quick visit, but I immediately fell in love with the place. Staying meant working, so with my B.A. in English I took jobs in the kitchens of such long-gone Boulder eateries as the Good Taste Crepe Shop, Pearl's, Potter's, Tom Horn's, the French Peasant, Café Circolo, Heartland Café, Vicki's (now Lucile's), the Alpha Phi sorority house ... and one shift at

The Sink. I was, proudly, the first pantry boy at the Greenbriar Inn.

Meanwhile, my literary food muse prompted me to cater a Jack Kerouac dinner party attended by Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. I'm not sure what qualified me, but I taught Conceptual Cooking at the Community Free School and hosted the Generic Gourmet Show on KGNU.

It soon became apparent that I'd be happier writing about Hollandaise sauce than actually whipping it up every day. I started penning freelance stories for diverse periodicals ranging from *Westword* and *Boulder Magazine* to *Audience* and *Front Range Magazine*. Eventually I was hired as the first male food editor of the *Daily Camera*, producing my Nibbles column about local food for 15 years before signing on as dining critic with the late *Rocky Mountain News*.

From that reserved front row seat, I was privileged to observe and be part of the state's gastronomic evolution. If we were viewing a time-lapse

film of those three decades in food, the first distinct theme that would emerge is health foods branching out from the environmental movement. (*Organic, sustainable, fair trade, dolphin-safe, vegan and locavore* were terms that wouldn't enter the mainstream lexicon for decades.)

As some observers dismissed them as insignificant "granola-heads," a group of pioneers began fashioning the Front Range as the epicenter of the multibillion-dollar natural foods industry.

Ultimately I believe this seventh wave originated in Colorado because we don't just tolerate independence and the entrepreneurial spirit, we celebrate it and give it a great big bear hug.

We shopped at the first health food stores: New Age Foods, Green Mountain Grainery, and Rainbow Foods. These led to the Pearl Street Market, then Alfalfa's, Wild Oats, Whole Foods, and Sunflower Markets. They provided a venue for signature local products ranging from Celestial Seasonings tea and White Wave tofu to Rudi's Bakery bread and Coleman beef to makers of yogurt, cheese, honey, ice cream, sodas, coffee and nutrition bars.

Now, longtime farmers and organic newcomers found they had places to sell their greens and eggs, especially with the launch of Front Range farmers' markets where the agricultural, the organic, the culinary, and the artisan elements began to merge. Eventually chefs' menus would proudly note MouCo Camembert, Long Farms pork belly, locally smoked fish and game, and Alfred Eames' wines.

Is it any surprise that one of the very first gatherings in the United States of the nascent Slow Food movement took place in Peggy Markel's Boulder kitchen? And care for the planet encompassed concern for its hungriest inhabitants inspiring the birth of Community Food Share and other food banks.

Our growing taste for the good stuff fed the need for cooking schools, food competitions, the first cooking stores like the Peppercorn, and food gatherings such as the Taste of the Nation, the Aspen Food & Wine Classic, the Great American Pie Festival, the Chocolate Fling, the Taste of Vail, and Denver Restaurant Week. (There was also a SPAM event at the reservoir, but we don't like to talk about it.)

Meanwhile, Charlie Papazian's homebrew classes begat the microbrew crew including Boulder Beer, New Belgium, Oskar Blues and Wynkoop, and Denver's Great American Beer Festival, still the largest such event in the country. *Colorado beer* became synonymous with *excellence*.

Where there were once a scant handful of recipe collections by the state's authors, there are shelves crowded with Colorado cookbooks and food guidebooks, not to mention local food websites and foodie radio shows.

Colorado cuisine is no longer oxymoronic. New Yorkers no longer kick figurative sand in our face as they once did while flying by on the way to Aspen. They come to eat... and then fly to Aspen.

Standing at the corner of 12th and Pearl, circa spring 2009, I spy Bradford Heap's soon-to-open gastropub next to the award-winning green eatery The Kitchen, near Top Chef winner Hosea Rosenberg's Jax Fish House down the street of the future home of the acclaimed Frasca and so many others. What a long taste trip it's been.

As another generation of native chocolatiers, microdistillers, pastry chefs and salsa makers emerges and Colorado's culinary star rises, we pay tribute to the innumerable pioneers who paved the way. We thank the waves of immigrants from Ethiopia and Nepal and everywhere in between who've enriched our collective palate with their eateries, markets, fare, crops and condiments.

Over the years I often thought, "This state deserves a food magazine of its own." Now you hold one in your hands. I can't wait to see what the next generations bring to the dinner table in the years to come.

Let's eat.

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