

DINING ON THE RANGE

The Food Lover's Prize Pack

Experience Albertan cuisine by going to where.ca/calgary and entering our newest contest.

Prize includes:

- Dinner for two at Blink Restaurant & Bar
- A culinary tour of Calgary with Urban Safari Tours
- *Cheap Eats and My Favourite Restaurants in Calgary & Banff* by local food critic John Gilchrist

Waterton National Park is a landscape that has to be experienced firsthand—nowhere else in Alberta do the mountains meet the prairie with such ferocity. Against this backdrop sits Spread Eagle Ranch, a bison operation with two claims to fame. The first is the philosophy of its owner, Tom Olson, who raises his bison the natural way: munching on native grasses, growing at their own pace, mating at will, and even falling victim to the odd grizzly bear.

The second is taste. Olson's bison meat would be equivalent to a full-bodied Chilean when all you've had is Zinfandel. This is meat for the red-blooded: dense, rich, and with little fat to moderate its sweet, earthen flavour.

Calgary's dining scene is going back to its roots with locally grown produce and naturally raised meat.

BY SALLY MACKINNON

"Isn't he a beaut?" says Olson, gesturing to a bull lounging less than five metres away. "Look at the size of him. Prehistoric. This is their life, out on the plains. It's better for them. Their meat tastes better."

In addition to raising his animals the way their forefathers lived, Olson's bison never see the inside of a feedlot, take at least a year longer to fully mature, and their meat is dry-aged for a minimum of 30 days. In other words, it tastes like meat did at the turn of the century, when Alberta emerged as the home of a superior class of livestock. Times change, as the old adage goes, and the meat industry did too. But, Olson's approach isn't an anomaly; it's part of a critical mass of ranchers and farmers who've chosen to turn back the clock. Once their products leave the home-stand, they're picked up by a new generation of chefs who go out of their way to source locally. The result is a redefinition of local cuisine.

Eating local in Calgary is something you couldn't avoid, even if you wished to. Erik Butters, chairman of the Alberta Beef Producers, estimates that 90 per cent of the beef consumed in Calgary comes from Alberta, which is also Canada's second largest agricultural producer. Its breadbasket produces wheat, oats, barley and canola; the northern prairie provinces are the "Honey Belt" of Canada; and central Alberta is known for its sweet corn, squash and potatoes. Added to this are the vast swaths of the province that are home to cattle, bison, elk and deer.

But, the relationship between Alberta's producers and consumers hasn't always been strong. When Margaret Webb, author of *Apples to Oysters: A Food Lover's Tour of Canadian Farms*, travelled more than 3,000 kilometres for a taste of legendary Alberta beef, she was shocked by the disconnect between ranchers and diners in a city that dubs itself Cowtown. "Sommeliers who serve you a bottle of wine are able to tell you what kind of grape went into that wine, how it was made, what winery made it," says Webb. "But nobody, not the waiters or the chefs at most of the restaurants I went to, could tell me anything about how the steak was raised, or who raised it."

That was back in 2005. Today Webb is quick to point out that times are changing, thanks to growing public awareness about organic food and carbon footprints. She also notes that she did find



PHOTOGRAPHS: (TOP) COURTESY TOM OLSON, OLSON'S HIGH COUNTRY; (BOTTOM) COURTESY TRAVEL ALBERTA; (RIGHT) COURTESY CANADIAN ROCKY MOUNTAIN RESORTS

a server, at the River Café, who could wax poetic about their beef.


Webb isn't alone in being optimistic about the future of local cuisine. Tom Olson says he has seen business grow exponentially since he started in 1993. From an initial herd of 6, he now has 4,000 head spread over five different ranches. In 2004, Calgary acquired its first year-round farmers' market, which attracted 1.2 million shoppers last year. Dine Alberta, a government program that encourages restaurants to source locally, had 30 participants when it started in 2006; eight months into 2008, it has 118. For John Gilchrist, one of Calgary's top food critics, these statistics are indicative of the most significant trend in Calgary's restaurant scene.

"The biggest change I have seen is a transition from the Euro chef," he says. "If you have a German chef or a French chef, they're going to cook the same way they cooked in Germany and France. If they've never seen a purple potato, they're not going to use it. The young Canadian chef is going to be more experimental, and more interested in supporting local producers." Gilchrist adds that there are more of these chefs in Calgary every year: Duncan Ly at Hotel Arts, Johnathan Canning at Olives, Wade Sirois at Forage, Paul Rogalski at Rouge, Jonas Hamre at JaroBlue and the chefs at the restaurants owned by Canadian Rocky Mountain Resorts. And, of course, Scott Pohorelic, executive chef at the River Café, which serves Tom Olson's

bison. "Sourcing local gives us the ability to shop from someone who knows what they're doing. No, who cares about what they're doing," says Pohorelic.

The River Café, a restaurant entirely themed on regional Canadian cuisine, has practiced this philosophy for 13 years. As natural as it sounds for a restaurant to be part of the growing process, it isn't easy; being "ingredients-inspired" means learning to adapt when you can't get asparagus, but 400 pounds of summer squash shows up at your door. "We're definitely at the whim of Mother Nature," says Pohorelic. "If it's raining enough that the potato farm-

er can't get out to pick the potatoes, then we don't get any potatoes. But, I think finally, we, in the industry are seeing the value of cooking food that isn't made to travel. Local is certainly the new buzz word."

Sentiments echoed by Tom Olson, surveying his land from a hillcrest more than 200 km away. "Yes, it's much more difficult. Sure it is. And it's more expensive," he says. "But if people are going to eat bison, they want the real McCoy." 



PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY RIVER CAFÉ

5 ALBERTA DISHES

BISON

Restaurant: The River Café
Source: Olson's High Country
Bison strip loin with seasonal vegetables, \$46.

BEEF

Restaurant: Opus on 8th
Source: Diamond Willow
Beef tenderloin, served with roasted potatoes, local vegetables and Japanese steak sauce, \$37.

PRODUCE

Restaurant: Rouge
Source: Rouge's on-site garden
Homegrown salad greens with select dressing, \$12.

ELK

Restaurant: The Rancho
Source: Canadian Rocky Mountain Ranch
Elk flank steak, served with herb potato gnocchi, wilted spinach, summer squash and green pepper-corn brandy cream, \$34.

CHICKEN

Restaurant: Blink Restaurant & Bar
Source: Sunterra Farms
Lemon and garlic roasted chicken, served with pasta pearls, chanterelle mushrooms, snow peas and black summer truffle, \$28.

WHERE TO DINE LOCAL

Barclay's (Sheraton Suites Calgary Eau Claire)
The Bear's Den
The Belvedere
Bistro Twenty Two Ten
Buchanan's
Chef's Table (Kensington Riverside Inn)
The Coup
Forage (take out)
Juilliard
La Chaumière
Muse
Nectar Desserts
North 51° Steakhouse (Delta Calgary Airport)
Open Range
Raw Bar (Hotel Arts)
Red Door Bistro
The Rimrock (Fairmont Palliser)
River Café
Rouge
Saint Germain
Sorrentino's
Teatro
The Tribune Restaurant

Source: Dine Alberta

