



# A Cowboy Cookout at 10,000 Feet

On a four-day, 55-mile horseback ride from Vail to Aspen, writer EUGENIA BONE discovers how good outdoor cooking can get, thanks to Colorado chef Kelly Liken. **PHOTOGRAPHS BY KEN KOCHEY**

Kelly Liken's pea shoot and arugula salad (recipe, p. 110) awaits riders after a day of crossing alpine meadows threaded with tiny creeks, OPPOSITE.





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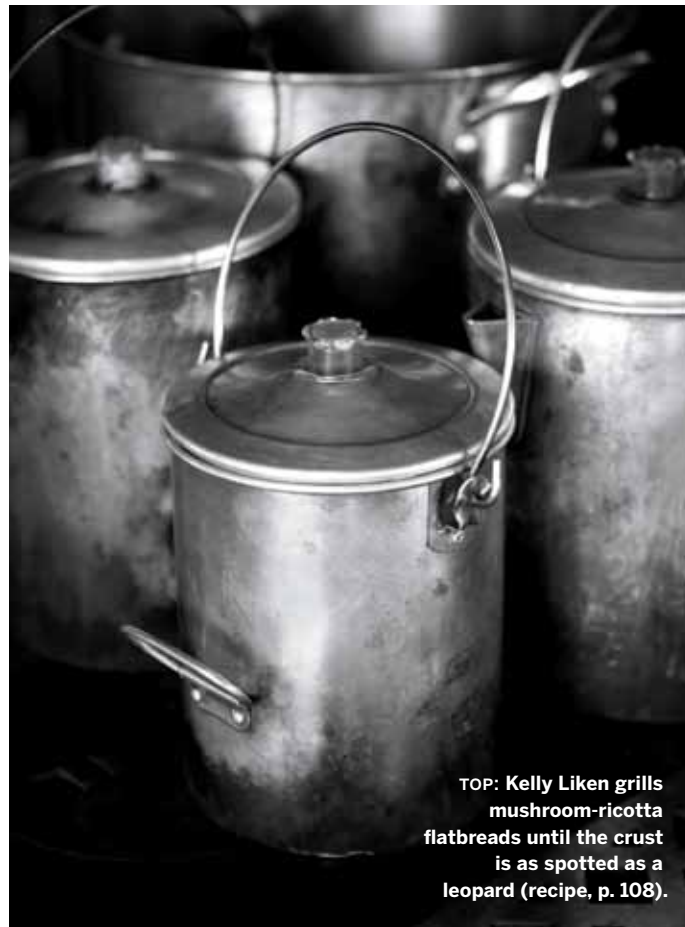
HEN I TOLD MY mother I was going on a long horseback ride and I was nervous, not having ridden since horses were a substitute for boys in my affections, she said, “Well, you need to look each hoss in the face and ask, ‘Do you want to carry me?’”

At the time, that seemed like good advice. A communion of some sort would definitely be to my advantage. But instead, the cowboys at Edwards, Colorado’s Bearcat Stables picked out my horse for the four-day, 55-mile trek from Vail to Aspen, through the magnificent White River National Forest and Holy Cross Wilderness Area. I was assigned a gentle gelding named Socks. Nonetheless, I pocketed an apple at breakfast, figuring that what I couldn’t achieve by horse-whispering, I could achieve with food.

Food was definitely going to be a part of this riding experience, and not just for the horses. Bearcat partner Leeds

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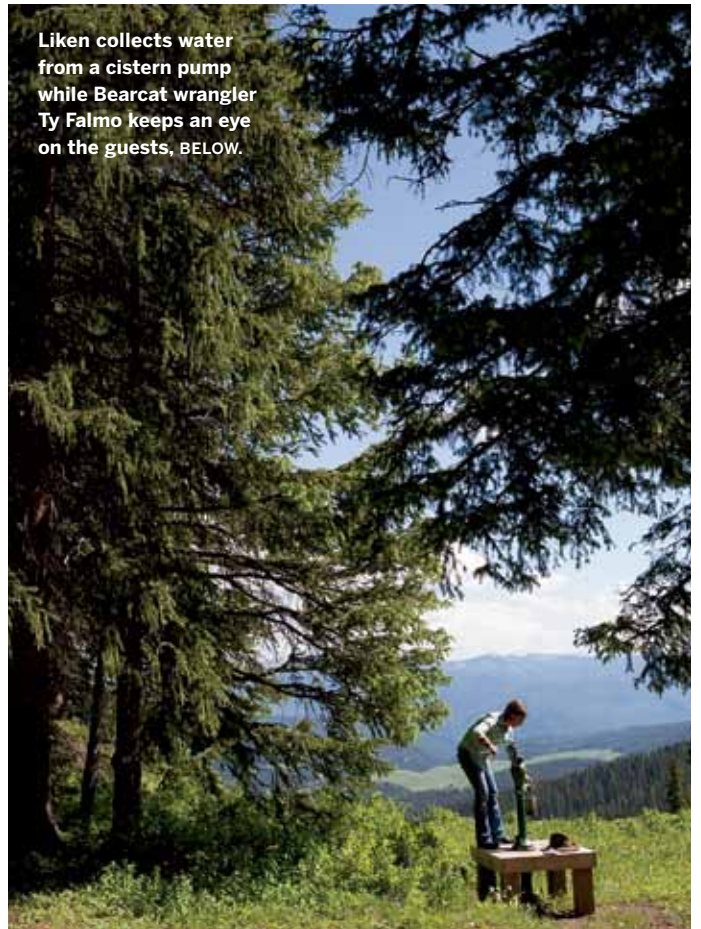
*Eugenia Bone is the author, most recently, of Mycophilia: Revelations From the Weird World of Mushrooms.*



TOP: Kelly Liken grills mushroom-ricotta flatbreads until the crust is as spotted as a leopard (recipe, p. 108).



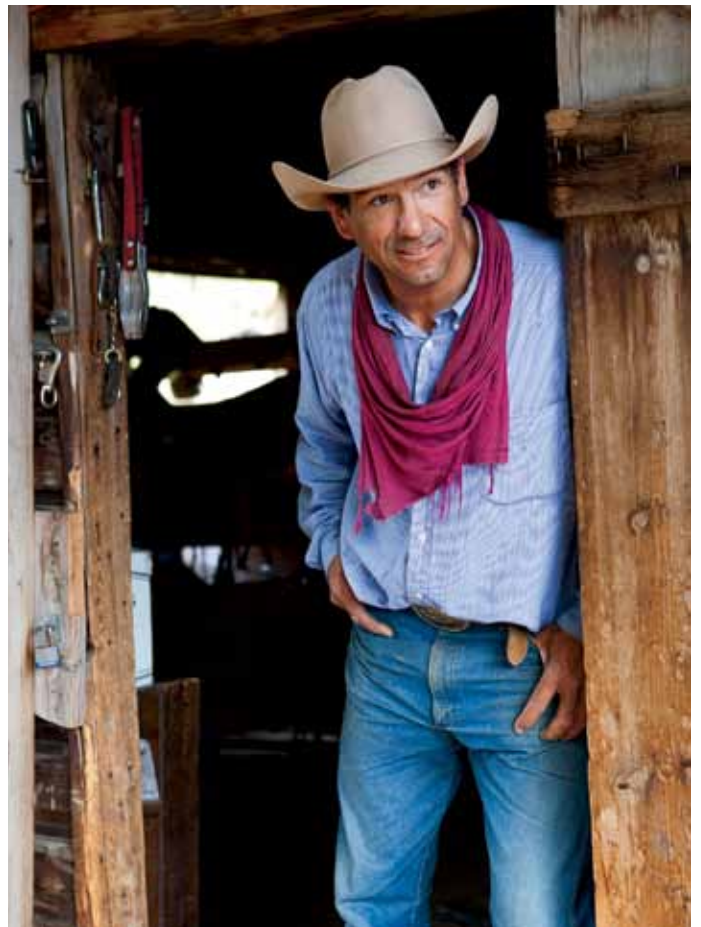
Liken collects water from a cistern pump while Bearcat wrangler Ty Falmo keeps an eye on the guests, BELOW.



Butcher, a sommelier, collaborated with his friend Kelly Liken, of Restaurant Kelly Liken in Vail, to prepare wonderful, rustic dinners for us on the trail. Liken—one of the best chefs in the Southwest, a *Top Chef* finalist and a contestant on *Iron Chef America*—seemed in her element, happily cooking at fire pits in the waning light.

Gavin Selway, a weathered fellow in aging chaps and the other half of Bearcat, led our ride; a hired hand, Todd Brown, followed with a packhorse laden with cowboy necessities (saws, first-aid supplies, bug spray). There were 12 of us, including the cowboys, plus the packhorse: “Twenty-five heartbeats on the trail,” said Todd. When I first saw my fellow riders, young men and women attired in gorgeous western gear, I figured they were real cowboys and cowgirls...until I heard their English accents and found out they were swigging amaretto from their flasks. (They were, it turns out, freshly minted British MDs.)

We traveled in a line, changing places periodically to separate quarreling horses. “It’s like managing a bunch of third-graders,” sighed Selway. We rode through grass pastures knee-high with purple columbines, pink primroses and bluebells; we scared up deer that bounded away on legs like springs. Selway pointed out medicinal plants cowboys use to treat sore muscles and scrapes, and if you were in the back of the line, you heard Brown’s litany of naughty cowboyisms (apparently a “cowboy hand warmer” is a horse turd).



The first day was an eight-hour ride, and by the end I felt sore and tired, but also exhilarated to have accomplished the journey. (Subsequent days were less arduous.) When we entered the Peter Estin Hut, named for a famous skier, and pulled off our boots, I couldn't get enough of the simple pleasure of wiggling my toes.

The huts—we stayed at two—lay between 9,700 and 11,700 feet above sea level and are part of a series of beautifully maintained back-country log cabins in the Colorado Rockies known as the 10th Mountain Division Huts (the 10th Mountain Division of the US Army trained in the Rockies during World War II). Our huts had comfortable beds, pegs on the wall for our hats, open kitchens with wood-burning stoves and views of the endless craggy peaks of the Williams Range, the Maroon Bells and the Elks.

On our first night, we were greeted with the profoundly satisfying scent of warm bread. Liken, a brown-eyed 35-year-old with quick, confident hands, was cooking flatbread over a campfire's embers until the crust was as spotted as a leopard; she then spread it with ricotta and sautéed wild mushrooms (recipe, p. 108). "Pizza," she told us, smiling, "is inherently shareable food." Her friend Kevin Furtado, the winemaker at California's now-shuttered K. Furtado Wines, was there to pour his 2009 rosé of Syrah, as dainty and floral as the jars of wildflowers on the porch tables.

Liken is one of a dozen or so chefs defining Colorado cuisine today. I've been to her elegant Vail restaurant, where she prepares unfussy, scrupulously sourced New American dishes, like potato-crusting trout fillets with haricots verts. She cooks outdoors in the same spirit. Indeed, the essential Kelly Liken seems most evident under the big Colorado sky.

She served our dinners at a long picnic table, the mood wholesome and raucous. On our first night, we grabbed Frenched lamb chops from a huge black skillet and dipped them in a powerfully herby gremolata; there was also a plat-

## Mountain-Hut Menu

### Starter

**Grilled Flatbreads with Mushrooms, Ricotta and Herbs, p. 108**

### Mains and Sides

**Herb-Crusted Rack of Lamb with Gremolata Pesto, p. 88**  
2009 Louis M. Martini  
Sonoma County  
Cabernet Sauvignon

**Sautéed Baby Squash with Scallions, p. 86**

**Pea Shoot and Arugula Salad with Radishes and Hazelnuts, p. 110**

### Dessert

**Summer Plum Crostata, p. 86**

ter of baby summer squash sautéed with scallions and a deep bowl of peppery high-altitude arugula tossed with paper-thin radishes and fennel (recipes, pp. 86 and 110). Then, while billions of stars brightened overhead, the cowboys prepared a proper campfire. At first, I thought the idea was cliché. "But we do campfires all the time!" protested Liken. She brought out slices of plum crostata; the crust hinting of salt, the filling a purple bruise of tart fruit. As we sat around the fire, the cowboys told stories of hauntings they had experienced, and with the dark woods behind my back, I believed.

Bearcat's cook, Danielle Carrillo, prepared breakfast: eggs, pan-fried potatoes, thick-cut bacon and strong coffee. Lunches were on the trail: sandwiches, pickles and cold beer. By day two, incredibly, I was feeling almost tough. We rode through spruce forests, mushrooms erupting from the pine needles; through aspen groves bathed in pale green light; beside clear, frantic streams. The second night took us to the Diamond J Ranch, a dude ranch on the Frying Pan River—kind of a vacation within a

vacation, with hot tubs, Internet access and ice cubes—where Liken served a red-pepper bisque and halibut with parsley salsa, ending the meal with wild-strawberry shortcake.

Everyone, happily, bathed.

And then we were back on the trail, heading up, up, up through the Hunter-Frying Pan Wilderness Area, past alpine meadows punctuated with giant boulders and braided with tiny creeks, to our last and highest destination: Mount Yeckel, where we had a 360-degree view of America.

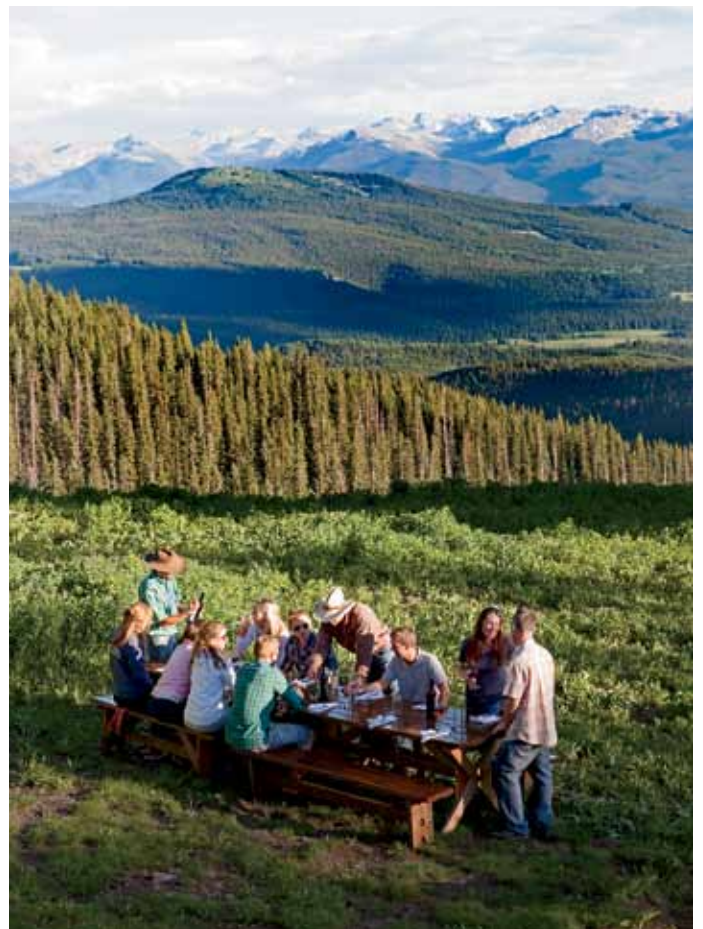
Liken was waiting at the hut, busy turning elk tenderloin over an open fire. "My favorite place to cook is outside," she said. "In fact, my husband [Rick Colomitz, general manager of the restaurant] built me an outdoor oven at home...and a kegerator for himself." We watched our big-bellied ponies roll in their dusty, high-mountain corral; wineglasses in hand, we were a bit light-headed from exertion and altitude. With the elk, Liken served us a mix of wild mushrooms, which we ate with Furtado's refined, manly Syrah. Then the Brits, having changed into flannel pajamas printed with bucking broncos, got a wood-chopping lesson from the cowboys. "This is the Colorado I love," said Liken, sipping wine as she looked out over the mountains. Indeed, her cooking style reflects the grand yet simple pleasures of this Colorado: the free range, the forests, the red earth.

It was a full day of riding before we finally emerged from the woods and saw Aspen. Our horses snorted in recognition. Maybe it had to do with the rigor of the trail, the hugeness of the scenery or the sense that for generations, this was the way frontiersmen used to experience the land, but from this vantage point, Aspen simply looked like a pretty town snuggled in the mountains, where we'd find oats and a warm bed.

# Our huts had open kitchens with views of endless craggy mountain peaks.



Colorado rack of lamb comes with an herby gremolata (recipe, p. 88) and sautéed baby squash (recipe, p. 86).



## Sautéed Baby Squash with Scallions

📖 PAGE 85

🕒 TOTAL: 20 MIN • 6 SERVINGS

Chef Kelly Liken and her husband, Rick Colomitz, work with local elementary schools, teaching students how to plant and tend an edible garden. A lot of Liken's baby squash comes from the schools, but the kids often forget to label the seedlings, so it's always a surprise which varieties arrive.

- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1¼ pounds baby squash, halved
- 1 bunch of scallions, finely chopped
- 1 large shallot, finely chopped
- Salt and freshly ground pepper
- 3 tablespoons chopped flat-leaf parsley

In a large skillet, melt the butter. Add the squash, scallions and shallot and season with salt and pepper. Cover and cook over moderate heat, stirring occasionally, until the squash is tender and lightly browned, 8 minutes. Stir in the parsley and serve right away.

## Summer Plum Crostata

ACTIVE: 35 MIN; TOTAL: 2 HR 30 MIN

6 SERVINGS

This elegant tart is a great option for cooking in the bare-bones kitchen of a mountain cabin, since it doesn't require a special pan. Liken uses Colorado plums, which she loves for their "beautiful tartness." Even when ripe, the plums are somewhat tangy, thanks to Colorado's cool nighttime temperatures. Any firm-but-ripe plums will work perfectly here.

- 1¼ cups all-purpose flour, plus more for dusting
- ½ cup sugar, plus more for sprinkling
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 1 stick cold unsalted butter, cubed and chilled
- ¾ cup ice water
- 1 tablespoon cornstarch
- ¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ¼ teaspoon finely grated orange zest
- 1 pound firm-but-ripe plums, pitted and cut into eighths
- 1 large egg yolk mixed with 1 tablespoon of water

1. In a food processor, add the 1¼ cups of flour, 2 tablespoons of sugar and the salt and pulse to combine. Add the butter and pulse until the mixture resembles coarse meal. Sprinkle on the ice water and pulse until the dough just barely comes together. Gather the dough and pat it into a disk. Wrap the dough in plastic and refrigerate until chilled, about 30 minutes.
2. Preheat the oven to 425° and position a rack in the lower third. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper. Working on a lightly floured surface, roll out the disk of dough to a 12-inch round; transfer to the baking sheet. Chill the dough until firm, 15 minutes.
3. Meanwhile, in a bowl, combine the remaining ¼ cup plus 2 tablespoons of sugar with the cornstarch, cinnamon and orange zest. Add the plums and toss well. Let stand, stirring occasionally, until the sugar is mostly dissolved, about 15 minutes.
4. Arrange the fruit in the center of the dough, leaving a 1½-inch border all around. Fold the edge of the dough up and over the plums. Brush the rim with the egg wash and sprinkle with sugar.

**This luscious plum crostata doesn't require a tart pan. OPPOSITE: Winemaker Kevin Furtado pours a glass for Bearcat's Gavin Selway.**





5. Bake the plum crostata for about 50 minutes, until the crust is golden and the fruit is tender and bubbling. Let the crostata cool on the baking sheet for 30 minutes, then cut into wedges and serve.

**MAKE AHEAD** The pastry disk can be refrigerated for up to 3 days.

## Herb-Crusted Rack of Lamb with Gremolata Pesto

 PAGE 85

**ACTIVE: 1 HR; TOTAL: 2 HR**

**6 SERVINGS**

Lamb is Liken's favorite food in the world, and she thinks Colorado lamb is the best. To show it off, she makes a pesto-like sauce by combining gremolata—a mixture of parsley, lemon zest and garlic—with pine nuts and olive oil. Liken often cooks lamb from start to finish over a wood fire, but this home-cook-friendly version calls for starting the racks on the grill and then transferring them to the oven to finish cooking.

### LAMB AND SAUCE

- 1 **tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil, plus more for drizzling**

**Three 8-bone racks of lamb (1½ pounds each), bones frenched and trimmings reserved (see Note)**

- 1 **carrot, chopped**
- 1 **stalk of celery, chopped**
- 1 **small onion, chopped**
- 6 **large garlic cloves, chopped (about 3 tablespoons)**
- 1 **medium tomato, chopped**
- ½ **cup dry red wine**
- 1 **quart low-sodium beef broth**
- ¼ **cup chopped flat-leaf parsley, stems reserved**
- 2 **tablespoons chopped thyme, stems reserved**

**Salt and freshly ground black pepper**

### GREMOLATA PESTO

- ¼ **cup pine nuts**
- 1 **cup flat-leaf parsley leaves**
- 2 **garlic cloves, smashed**

**Finely grated zest of 1 lemon**

- ½ **cup extra-virgin olive oil**

**Salt and freshly ground black pepper**

**1. PREPARE THE LAMB AND SAUCE** In a large saucepan, heat the 1 tablespoon of olive oil. Add the reserved lamb trimmings along with the chopped carrot, celery and onion and cook over moderately high heat, stirring, until lightly browned, about 10 minutes. Add 1 table-

spoon of the chopped garlic and the chopped tomato and cook until softened, about 5 minutes. Add the red wine and bring to a boil. Add the low-sodium beef broth and the reserved parsley and thyme stems and simmer over moderate heat until reduced to 1¼ cups, about 1 hour. Strain the lamb sauce into a small saucepan and spoon off the fat. Season the sauce with salt and pepper and keep warm.

**2.** Preheat the oven to 400°. Light a grill or preheat a grill pan. In a small bowl, combine the chopped parsley, chopped thyme and the remaining 2 tablespoons of garlic. Season the lamb racks with salt and freshly ground black pepper and coat with the herb mixture. Drizzle the lamb with olive oil and oil the grill or the grill pan. Grill the lamb over moderately high heat, turning once, until browned all over, about 5 minutes. Transfer the racks to a sturdy baking sheet.

**3.** Roast the racks of lamb for about 15 minutes, until an instant-read thermometer inserted in the center of the meat registers 130° to 135° for medium-rare. Let the racks rest for 15 minutes.

**4. MEANWHILE, MAKE THE GREMOLATA PESTO** In a medium skillet, toast the pine nuts over moderate heat, stirring, until they are golden, about 5 minutes. Let the toasted pine nuts cool slightly. Transfer the toasted pine nuts to a blender. Add the parsley leaves, garlic and grated lemon zest and pulse to combine. Add the olive oil and process until smooth. Season the gremolata pesto with salt and pepper.

**5.** Reheat the sauce. Carve the racks of lamb into chops and serve the chops with the sauce and pesto.

**SERVE WITH** Sautéed Baby Squash with Scallions (recipe, p. 86).

**NOTE** Ask your butcher to french the racks of lamb (meaning scrape the fat and gristle from the bones); also be sure to ask the butcher to reserve all trimmings.

**MAKE AHEAD** The sauce and gremolata pesto can be refrigerated overnight.

**WINE** *Dense, concentrated Sonoma Cabernet Sauvignons are fantastic with gamey meats like this rack of lamb. Look for the generous 2009 Louis M. Martini Sonoma County or the spicy 2006 Stonestreet Alexander Mountain Estate.*

*continued on p. 108*

# Vail, On & Off the Trail

## Restaurants

### 1. Restaurant Kelly Liken

When she's not riding to Aspen on horseback, Liken runs the kitchen here, cooking tasty, ultra-seasonal, modern Rocky Mountain cuisine, like roast duck with peach chutney. [kellyliken.com](http://kellyliken.com).

### 2. Matsuhisa Vail

For his fifth namesake restaurant, star chef Nobu Matsuhisa serves his famous sushi, plus Peru-inspired dishes like lobster ceviche and grilled local lamb with anticucho chile sauce. [matsuhisavail.com](http://matsuhisavail.com).

### 3. Sonnenalp Resort

Formerly of New York's Lake Placid Lodge, chef Steve Topple runs the five restaurants here. Local game figures prominently (elk-and-buffalo chili, boar bratwurst). [sonnenalp.com](http://sonnenalp.com).

## Outfitter & Hotels

### 1. Bearcat Stables

The outfitter runs three-night horseback rides from Vail to Aspen all summer and offers classes by the hour. *\$1,800 per person, includes all meals and accommodations; \$50 for a one-hour ride; bearcat stables.com.*

### 2. The Sebastian Vail

Formerly the Vail Plaza Hotel & Club, the Sebastian reopened in 2011, adding a cozy lobby and an icicle-themed bar. *Doubles from \$325; thesebastianvail.com.*

### 3. Four Seasons Resort Vail

A highlight of this resort is the 14,000-square-foot spa's high-altitude-adjustment massage. *Doubles from \$175; fourseasons.com/vail.*

### 4. Solaris Residences

This complex has two-to-four-bedroom rentals, plus a movie theater where guests can eat ribs and order wine from a 100-bottle list. *From \$525; solarisvail.com.*



The cowboys tell ghost stories to the group as they all eat dessert by the campfire.



## Grilled Flatbreads with Mushrooms, Ricotta and Herbs

📄 PAGE 82

🕒 TOTAL: 45 MIN

MAKES TWO 12-INCH FLATBREADS

"The main challenge of backcountry cooking is being limited to wood-burning stoves and fire pits. There's no low, medium or high on those," says Liken. "Luckily, one of my favorite things to make is grilled flatbread, which doesn't require an oven." For these flatbreads, she gathers wild mushrooms, but cultivated ones like shiitake and oyster mushrooms are also delicious.

**¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil, plus more for brushing and drizzling**

- ½ pound oyster and shiitake mushrooms, thinly sliced (2 cups)
- 1 shallot, minced
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- ¼ cup dry white wine

Salt and freshly ground pepper  
Two 8-ounce balls of pizza dough, at room temperature

- 1 cup fresh ricotta cheese (8 ounces)
- 2 tablespoons coarsely chopped chervil
- 2 tablespoons coarsely chopped chives
- 2 tablespoons coarsely chopped flat-leaf parsley
- 2 tablespoons coarsely chopped tarragon

1. In a medium skillet, heat the ¼ cup of olive oil. Add the mushrooms and cook over moderately high heat, stirring occasionally, until lightly browned, about 5 minutes. Add the shallot and garlic and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add the wine and cook until evaporated, about 1 minute. Season with salt and pepper.

2. Light a grill or preheat a grill pan and lightly oil a rimless baking sheet. On the baking sheet, stretch each ball of pizza dough out to a 12-inch round; brush with extra-virgin olive oil. Carefully slide the dough rounds onto the grill and cook over moderately high heat, shifting the rounds to prevent scorching, until lightly browned on the bottom, about 2 minutes. Flip the rounds and spread ½ cup of the fresh ricotta cheese over each one. Scatter the sautéed mushrooms and herbs over the flatbreads and grill until heated through, about 2 minutes.

3. Transfer the flatbreads to a work surface, drizzle lightly with olive oil and season with salt and pepper. Cut into wedges and serve right away.

**MAKE AHEAD** The cooked mushrooms can be refrigerated for up to 3 days. Rewarm before using.

**WINE** *Earthy Spanish Tempranillos, like the 2007 Conde de Valdemar Crianza or the 2008 Dominio de Eguen Protocolo, go brilliantly with mushrooms, like the ones on these smoky flatbreads.*

*continued on p. 110*

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## Pea Shoot and Arugula Salad with Radishes and Hazelnuts

 PAGE 81

 TOTAL: 30 MIN • 6 SERVINGS

Summer is the time for ripe tomatoes and sweet corn across much of the country, but according to Liken, the mountains of Colorado aren't suited to those hot-weather vegetables. "People often think of pea shoots and arugula as springtime food, but here it's springtime all summer long—I can pick pea shoots in my garden from June to September," she says.

- ½ cup hazelnuts
- 1½ tablespoons Champagne vinegar or white wine vinegar
- ¼ teaspoon Dijon mustard
- ¼ teaspoon honey
- ¼ teaspoon minced shallot
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 5 ounces baby arugula
- 3½ ounces pea shoots
- 4 large radishes, trimmed and very thinly sliced on a mandoline

**1 fennel bulb—halved lengthwise, cored and very thinly sliced on a mandoline**

1. Preheat the oven to 375°. Spread the hazelnuts in a pie plate and toast until they are fragrant and the skins blister, about 14 minutes. Transfer the toasted hazelnuts to a kitchen towel and let cool slightly, then vigorously rub the nuts together to remove the skins. Coarsely chop the nuts.
2. In a large bowl, whisk the Champagne vinegar with the Dijon mustard, honey and

minced shallot. Add the extra-virgin olive oil and whisk until blended. Season the vinaigrette with salt and freshly ground black pepper. Add the arugula, pea shoots, radishes, fennel and chopped hazelnuts and toss well. Season with salt and pepper and serve right away.

**WINE** *Light-bodied, affordable Picpoul from France's southern Languedoc region goes well with green salads dressed with a simple vinaigrette. Look for the 2010 Hugues Beaulieu Picpoul de Pinet or 2010 Domaine du Pioch d'Or.* ●

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