

A cowboy cookout at 10,000 feet

By Eugenia Bone, Food & Wine

When 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 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 Estlin 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 backcountry log cabins in the Colorado Rockies known as the 10th Mountain Division Huts (the 10th Mountain Division of the U.S. 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.

“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.

Read the whole story