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The Mountain Town Issue

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Homespun Extravagance

Crested Butte Offers Tastes of Pure Mountain Comfort

BY BILL GIEBLER
PHOTOS BY MELISSA WATSON



Left to right: The Dogwood welcomes you; Ruby B&B's famous cinnamon rolls; Izzy's for breakfast.

A dozen years ago, on my only prior visit to Crested Butte, I tagged along to an extravagant summer party. Someone had rented a large downtown restaurant for the night. Italian, I think, but it didn't matter because that night it was sushi. Our party host had flown in about 10 chefs from his favorite New York City sushi restaurant—10 Japanese transplants flying to the Colorado Rockies with fresh-from-the-NYC-fish-market carry-on.

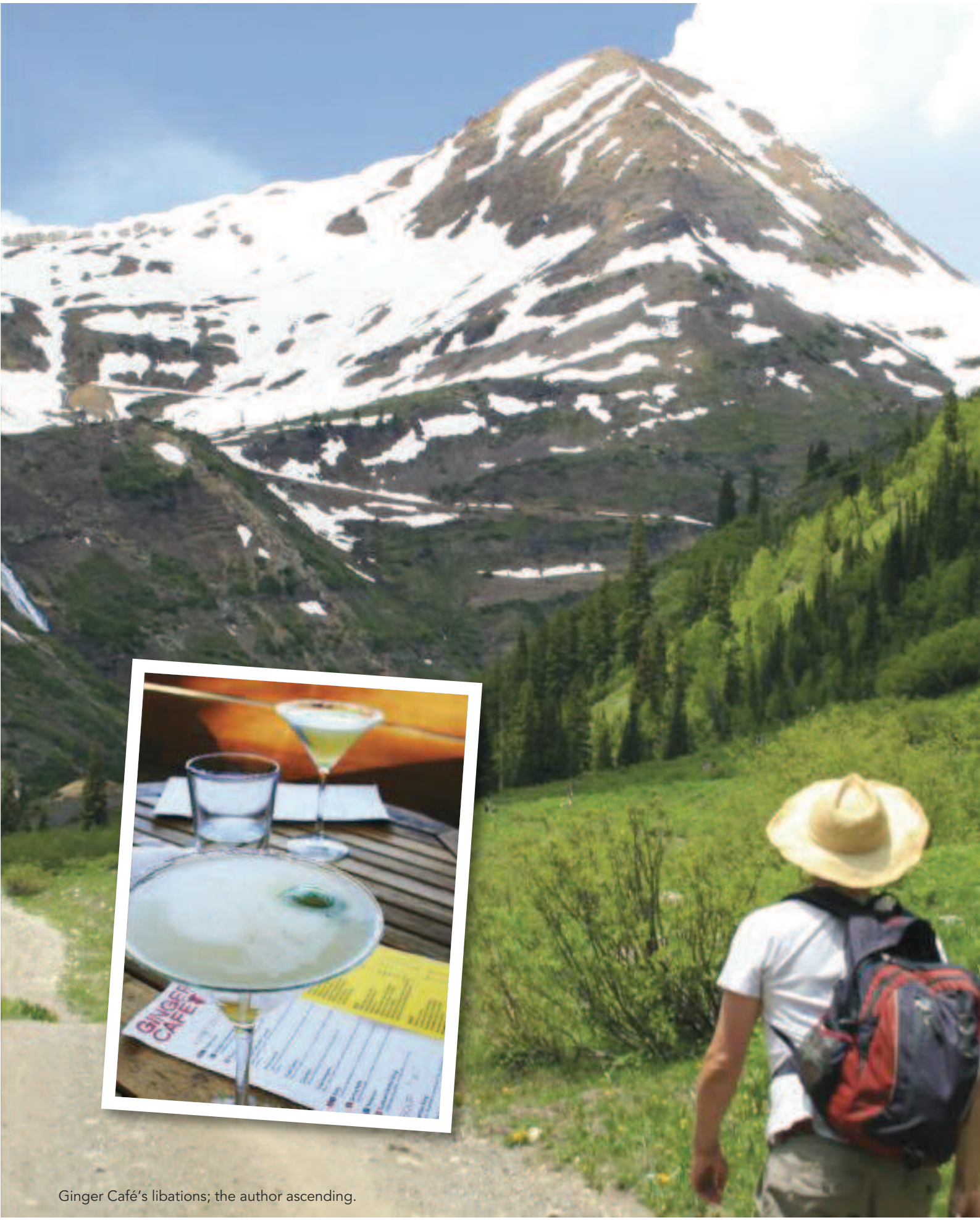
I marveled that even before the cost of food and saké (stacked cases of fine-quality, help-yourself sake) and airfare for the fish toters, the bill for the party included closing two restaurants (one each in "CB" and NYC) on—at least—this Saturday night.

Yet, to stroll into the party, it would have been easy to miss the extravagance. (That is, if sashimi-grade Atlantic salmon in a century-old saloon 8,900 feet above sea level could ever appear normal in our culture's numb-to-extravagance relationship with food miles.) The balance of the party consisted of simple decor, casual dress and good mountain folk.

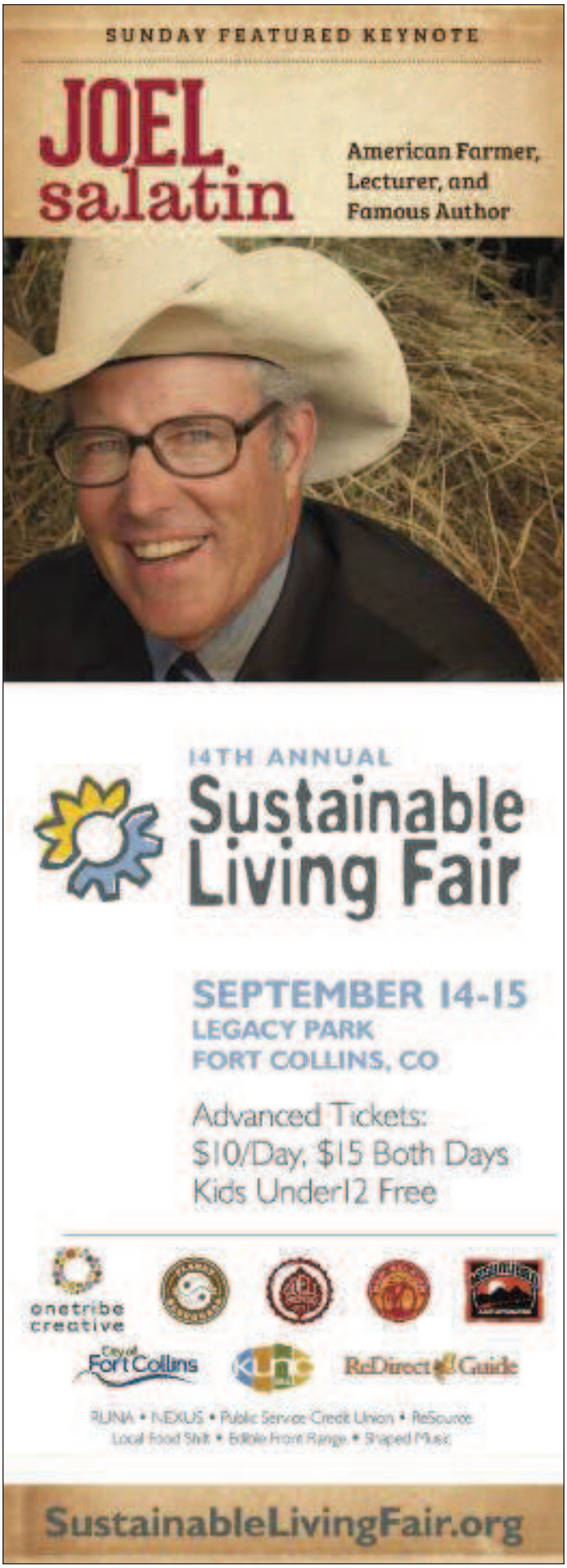
This year, my second trip to the town, I again indulged in extravagance and simple beauty. It was June, just as the late-bloom of summer was emerging from the quiet and muddy spring. My fiancée, Melissa, and I took a weekend Crested Butte food "trek"—a three-day foodie excursion—to get a more accurate and up-to-date view of what goes on in the CB food world. Here's how it went.

Friday Dinner: The Initial Ascent

After the five-hour drive from Boulder through the endless Fairplay Valley and over breathtaking Cottonwood Pass, we checked into the "comfort and economy" of Old Town Inn and strolled over to Elk Avenue—CB's main commercial street—in search of dinner. We were immediately attracted to Ginger Café, a multi-cultural curry house with a wide, inviting deck.



Ginger Café's libations; the author ascending.



Owners Spencer and Jennifer Hestwood moved to CB from Omaha, Nebraska, in 1998 to, among other reasons, take a break from years of restaurant work.

"I moved up to be a ski bum," Spencer confessed. But four years later he found himself launching Ginger, mending CB's missing food link with Indian and Thai dishes.

There, Melissa and I shared entrees of Veggie Korma and delectable Rice Biryani with lamb. Spencer learned many of the Indian recipes from the cooks at Omaha's Indian Oven. For Ginger's lamb dishes, Spencer uses Colorado leg of lamb, "super slow braised so it will take up the masala spice." Then he adds cashews, raisins and yogurt, resulting in a fork-flakable delight.

Additionally, 80% of their summer produce comes from three Western Slope farms. "The banana belt of Colorado is just west of here, so we're able to use a lot of local."

We sat on the deck for a good, slow meal on a bright and cool June evening, contemplated the importance of margaritas in Indian cuisine and delighted in a sweet mountain town late-blooming into summer. The sun set around us and we returned to the Inn fat and satisfied.

Saturday: "You Have to Go to Momo!"

"You have to go to Momo!" server Alison Bell said as she set down our "ham flowers"—mini quiches baked into slices-of-ham-as-crust in a muffin tin—and cinnamon, orange zest French toast. The Ruby, a modern, homey B&B, had invited us for breakfast.

"It's this Nepali man," she continued, "who sets up under a parachute up the street from Third Bowl Ice Cream." He serves curries and momos (the steamed and fried dumpling staple of Tibet and Nepal) in an open-air lot.

It was at this point I began to suspect we'd entered into an alternate Himalayan zone—hence the notion of a mountain food trek—where nearly every other experience was Indian, Nepali or Tibetan, and where we were surrounded by the patient generosity of mountain dwellers, and a happy population eager to scurry up and down their mountains.

We, too, were eager to scurry, to work off some of our breakfast. We had only a few hours, and Pittsburg seemed the most appropriate spot to do so.

"Drive up Slate River Road, park off to the left at the 'Pittsburg' town sign and cross the river to the trail," said Ruby cook Deb Gier. "It should only be about this deep," left hand just above her knee.

Thirty minutes later we were in the car. We pulled off the road under "stay on road" signs, and set out across a fast-flowing creek. The next two hours presented a series of large waterfalls, beautiful meadows and several ill-planned—but amusingly challenging—river crossings and scree-laden precipices as the trail came and went at its whim.

By the end of the hike, we were indeed ready for momos. We walked from our lodging at the Old Town Inn (everywhere in CB proper is walkable, though hopping on one of the "townies"—cruiser bikes offered on a complimentary first come, first served basis at most of the hotels and B&Bs—will put you better in "step" with the locals) and got to Karma Lama's Momo cart just in time.

Nine minutes before closing time he was out of momos, so we enjoyed a plate of yellow lentil dal, and slurped hot chai in the gnarled wooden furniture under the shade of large trees.

As a toddler during the Chinese invasion of Tibet, Karma fled from his homeland to Shimla, Northern India, on his mother's back. There, he lived into adulthood then moved to Nepal, exporting carpets to shops like Elk Avenue's Mubuhay Limited—a relationship that changed Karma's life, eventually landing him at home in Crested Butte, serving up momos, fine chai, good curries and big smiles on Mubuhay's patio.

Saturday Dinner: Approaching the Food Peak

In Dogwood Cocktail Cabin's cozy elongated yard, I sipped a "Pyrenees Punch"—a rum amaretto fizz with a balsamic reduction drizzle—while Melissa (a Southern girl), enjoyed a blood orange "Southern Sidecar," adorned with a sumac berry sugared rim. Each cocktail was better than the other—and shared menu space with a dozen other equally enticing culinary-inspired concoctions.

"A lot of our inspiration comes from food," Dogwood's Phoebe Pedersen explained. "If we go out and have a dish we like, I'll try to pull those flavors together in a cocktail."

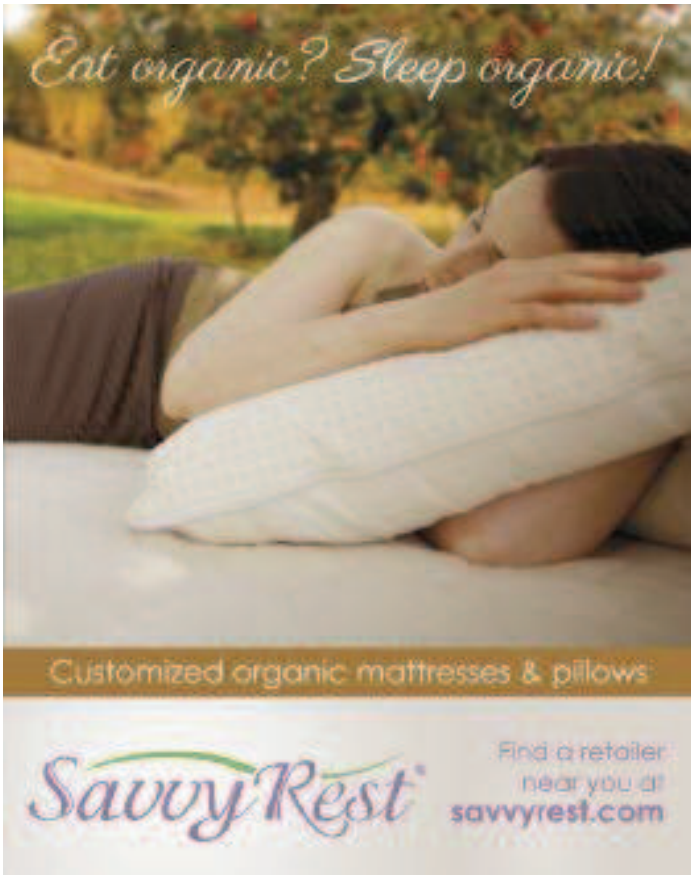
Dogwood is an 1891 mining cabin on the outside converted to a chic lounge inside—complete with co-owner husband Doug's dual turntables in the corner. The couple relocated from Portland, Oregon, a few years back to create their dream drinkery. Among their criteria: live in a never-before-visited place. This remote-but-hip mountain town immediately fit that bill—and got a little hipper with their arrival.

From there, a quick stroll up the alley delivered us to Crested Butte's finest top-notch, French-inspired bistro, Soupçon, where, along with a crisp Sauvignon Blanc, we shared appetizers of bright green English pea soup—a soup that sang a celebration of fresh peas, perfectly puréed and barely altered, it seemed, except for the subtlest improvements on what had grown in the garden—and scallops: perfectly charred, perfectly salty, melt-in-your-mouth ocean goodness.

We sat giddily enchanted by this summit of our food trek, blissfully unaware of the gluttonous catatonia that lay ahead.

The Vine That Spoiled

Crested Butte is a town conflicted about its place in Colorado's collection of resorts. It has all the elements necessary to be a top destina-









tion site: local wealth and high civic responsibility along with classic mining-era charm, decent shopping and good food. But it doesn't have the pull of, say, Aspen—the rich fraternal twin on the other side of the Maroon Bells.

Well bounded by marsh, beautiful mountains and strong anti-sprawl, anti-chain development policy (the growth is up the hill at Crested Butte Mountain Resort, or down valley at Crested Butte South) it's still only a handful of blocks long and wide and relatively unaltered.

The storefronts on Elk Avenue speak memories of wild cowboys, miners and saloons while being home to a collection of gift, jewelry and clothing shops, and several fun and fine food establishments. In the surrounding blocks, the residential architecture fits a strong code as well: converted miner's cabins and small domiciles adhering to a clear style convention.

Yet it's far from I-70, at the end of a road, on the way to nowhere. The ski mountain is highly respected, but smaller than others and with fewer family-friendly runs. And, unlike Telluride—yet another town built of this genetic makeup—it is not host to famous film and music festivals.

"We don't really want that, though," The Ruby's Deb said, considering the massive influx of visitors festivals bring. CB saw this during the two years it hosted the X-games. "We're happy not to have the crowds."

This sentiment was echoed again and again as we talked to other locals. I imagine a why-can't-you-be-more-like-your-sister? tourism bureau, desperately trying to craft the town into the destination stop she could be if she just gave it a little more effort, and CB saying, "yeah, that sounds pretty good," and returning to the porch hammock with a good book.

The conflict served us very well. In a town so charming, surrounded by mountains so beautiful, I'd expect either elite shopping or T-shirt shacks and taffy shops and stiff competition for tourist-packed sidewalk space. Instead, we enjoyed a peaceful crowdless visit with modest luxuries and great beauty, where the hints of extravagance always sat quietly in the back seat of comfort.

It's not without its risks, however. Saturday, after summiting on cocktails and appetizers, we suffered from our own extravagance. We could've stopped with the initial course at Soupçon. Perhaps should've—lacking the training for intake of large portions of rich food and excessive drink (at elevation, no less). But a full meal felt an imperative.

Melissa got the rack of lamb and I, filet mignon, washed into place among pea soup and charred ocean blubber with red wine: Melissa's complex, tannic Pinot Noir and my sweet, full, oaky, vanilla creamsicle of a Cabernet Sauvignon. The Cab was a crisis of judgment, the vine that spoiled the camel's animal-fat orgy. Both of our bodies re-

coiled from the richness and we took our leave, entrees half completed, and retreated to our room to rest before the descent.

Sunday Breakfast

Sunday was slower. We awoke on different schedules with different restorative needs. I was up early and hungry and headed to CB's sparse-but-earnest farmers' market by way of Izzy's, where Craig Maestro and crew provide bagel-centric breakfasts to long lines of local folk.

After 15 years in the area Craig is a local himself, a status additionally earned by his reluctance to ever go anywhere else. "I've been down to Gunnison about seven times in the last 10 years," he told me. Gunnison is 25 miles away. Craig's last trip to the Denver area was seven years ago.

Instead of jet-setting (or even car-setting) Craig bikes the eight miles from CB South well before dawn, all year long, to provide Buttians (byoo-shuns) with their bagels. But not just bagels. A hearty Greek scramble and potato latke filled my belly that morning as I quietly recovered from the over-indulgent Saturday night summit of our trek.

Melissa recovered differently, with a curative Nepali noodle soup and momos (finally momos) at Sherpa Café. A stop at local roaster Camp 4 Coffee served both our restorative needs.

Later, in the heat of midday, just before our drive down the mountain, we fueled up at Third Bowl Ice Cream. Here Kendall Tankersley and life and business partner Matt Smith conjure small-batch handmade ice creams. Completing their first year of purveying uncommon inventions, Kendall says they're "just now figuring it out." After all, when using real food ingredients instead of flavor extracts, every batch calls for its own process. Lemons and sweet potatoes, for instance, affect the alkalinity, acidity and astringency differently.

But not everyone will gravitate toward flavors like those scooped into my cup: Avocado Apricot ("like Peaches and Cream," Kendall explained. "I wanted to balance the richness"—of avocado, in this case—"with bright summer fruit flavor") and Goat Cheese and Fig. So they have basics like Sea Salt Caramel and Mint Chocolate Chip. "But ours isn't green," she is quick to point out, "and instead of mint flavoring we infuse fresh mint into the cream."

Delighted, surprised, overdone, cured and, most of all, full, it was time to leave CB. It won't be long, though, before we return for another sip, scoop and plateful; another serving of pure mountain comfort; another trek.

Bill Giebler lives, writes, eats and sips in Boulder with his fiancée, Melissa, and a rotating cast of one or the other's children. They love their getaways. His writing has appeared in *Organic Spa Magazine, Green Living Journal* and *Third Coast Digest.*

