



Mmm...tonight I think
I'll have Alberta beef.

THESE SEVEN
GASTRONOMICAL
HIGHS SHOULD
MAKE YOUR
ROCKY MOUNTAIN
SKI WEEK EVEN
MORE PALATABLE.

FUELING UP IN BANFF

BY SUE LEBRECHT



***Warning: Don't read this on an empty stomach.**

IT SHOULDN'T COME AS A SURPRISE TO LEARN THAT THE LITTLE TOWN OF BANFF has a listing of 138 eating establishments. After all, the place is synonymous with adventure; it's only fitting that the dining experience here be also a quest for the senses.

Banff chef Stephane Prevost, who hails from Montreal, agrees. "I like cities, and while Banff is a small town, the high traffic of tourists makes it somewhat cosmopolitan," he says. "It's a great place to start a new, interesting restaurant and live in a pristine environment."

Prevost echoes a sentiment that's probably as old as Banff itself. From its roots as a railway outpost and hot springs tourist destination, Banff's gastronomical growth has been a work of both external and internal influences. There was the coming and going of Canadian Pacific trains with Victorian kitchen cars and lavish menus on white service. Mountain guides from Switzerland, Austria and Germany brought their culinary preferences. There were teachings of Native people on local edibles, and the curing and smoking of game. Transients, immigrants, explorers and entrepreneurs, those staying and passing through, all brought a particular penchant for food, along with how it's best prepared and presented. Food may be a necessity, but it's perhaps, more importantly, a pleasure and art form.

Today, sophistication is probably the best way to describe the gastronomic choices around Banff—and Lake Louise. From international to regional cuisine, from fine dining to cozy cafés, the little mountainous community has evolved into an impressive buffet of international flavour and creativity.

What follows is a peek into seven restaurants in Banff—and Lake Louise. A listing of local restaurants can be found at www.banfflakelouise.com/dining, and a sampling of various menus can be found at www.dininginbanff.com, a consortium of 28 establishments.

Unlike other ski destinations in Canada, winter isn't prime season, however, reservations are still recommended, especially on weekends and holidays. What you needn't worry about, for the most part, is a dress code. "We understand people are out skiing all day long and don't have a whole wardrobe with them," says Alistair Barnes, the executive chef of Buffalo Mountain Lodge. "We call our dress code Rocky Mountain casual."

Curiosity getting the best of me, I wanted to know if the chefs of Banff, perhaps lured to the place more for a lifestyle than a paycheque, stood in defiance to the stereotypical "big" or "round" chef form. I had to ask: Is the typical Banff chef slim and fit? Answers ahead.



Photo: RACHEL BOEKEL



Photo: ADAM GORING

CAFÉ SOLEIL
208 Caribou St., Banff
403/762-2090
www.secretbanff.com

Main Courses: \$22-\$28
Most Popular Dish: Lamb Lollipops Tapas
Executive Chef: Stephane Prevost
Body Type: Robust—"I used to be much slimmer. I love to ski but can't now, I'm too busy."

A faithful, local crowd now frequents the Café Soleil, which just opened last year in time for the ski season. Small, loungey and candlelit, the restaurant has its palate in the Mediterranean, specializing in tapas. Think appetizers and communal food with a gathering of friends.

"Tapas come from Spain," explains Stephane Prevost, the chef and co-owner. "It's customary there to serve little portions of food to accompany wine and spirits. Here, though, we're more broad and diversified than a traditional restaurant."

The most popular of tapas is Lamb Lollipops: four medallions served over a chick pea and potato purée with a spicy Moroccan sauce. Other choice orders include the chicken-and-fig skewers with a Portuguese hot sauce, and slices of beef tenderloin over oyster mushrooms with a Gorgonzola shallot sauce.

"It's a fun place," said one Banff resident. "You order one tapas after another, three or four, with friends, and end up drinking way too much wine."

THE MAPLE LEAF GRILLE & SPIRITS

137 Banff Ave., Banff
403/760-7680

www.banffmapleleaf.com

Main Courses: \$19-\$38

Most Popular Dish: Elk Tenderloin
Executive Chef: Michael Lyon
Body Type: Slim—"That's what two kids and no days off will do."

Executive chef Michael Lyon has connections. He orders dairy and duck products from suppliers in Quebec, maple syrup from Ontario, Arctic char from Nunavut, pickerel from Manitoba, wild rice from Saskatchewan, mussels from Prince Edward Island... Food by province, the list goes on.

"When we looked at what we were about, we decided to call it Pan-Canadian cuisine, as in coast-to-coast," said Lyon, who worked in Toronto and Russia before moving to Banff three years ago. "I've been lucky I could purchase this way and get the products I want. The fishmongers know what I'm looking for and keep pushing the ante up. In winter we still have a catch-of-the-day."

Given Banff's socked-in mountain location, the offerings at the Maple Leaf—despite being all-Canadian—seem practically exotic. Also remarkable is the wine selection, with more than 300 Canadian labels. ▶



Photo: SUE LEBRECHT

BALKAN THE GREEK RESTAURANT

120 Banff Ave., Banff
403/762-3454

Main Courses: \$12-\$26

Most Popular Dish: Arni Psito (roast lamb)

Chef: Jason Carlos

Body Type: Sturdy—"I fish, hunt and ski...but not last year."

What's an authentic Greek restaurant doing in a place like Banff? Well, to the Greek husband and wife team of Jason and Joanna who met and married in Banff and opened the Balkan 20 years ago, it just seemed like the Greek thing to do.

The menu includes all the favourites: spanakopita, dolmathes, keftethes, tzatziki, souvlaki, moussaka and other traditional dishes from recipes passed down from generations. If you find the menu decisions too difficult, ask to have a look-see in the kitchen; this simple Greek restaurant custom is welcomed at the Balkan.

Visit on a Tuesday and you'll be treated to Greek Night, with a belly dancer, Greek dancing and customary plate smashing. "Plate smashing is a Greek custom," said Joanna Carlos. "When we're having fun and enjoying ourselves, it's a symbolic way of breaking all our worries, all our stresses." The flow of ouzo also seems to help the cause. Begun last March, the weekly event has become such a smashing success, it may be extended to Thursdays, too.



BUFFALO MOUNTAIN LODGE

700 Tunnel Mountain Rd., Banff
403/762-2400

www.crmr.com/bml/buffalo.html

Main Courses: \$26-\$34

Most Popular Dish: Buffalo Tenderloin

Executive Chef: Alistair Barnes

Body Type: Fit—outdoor nut, skiing, mountain biking, climbing

grazing, naturally raised animals."

The menu features Rocky Mountain cuisine. "There are different interpretations, but essentially Rocky Mountain cuisine describes the use of natural and local ingredients, along with traditional preparation methods," said Barnes. "We use wild berries, squashes and game meat, but we're not kidding ourselves, we have long winters and do have to reach farther afield than our provincial backyard."

DEER LODGE

109 Lake Louise Dr., Lake Louise
403/522-3747, www.crmr.com

Main Courses: \$23-\$35

Most Popular Dish: Elk Striploin

Executive Chef: Kelly Strutt

Body Type: Fit—avid skier, canoeist, kayaker

With a menu similar to that of Buffalo Mountain Lodge, Deer Lodge—also a property of Canadian Rocky Mountain Resorts—specializes in offering game dishes with indigenous mountain flavour.

Its Rocky Mountain cuisine is evident with a menu that includes caribou medallions served with a black current port glaze, and yam and goat cheese gratin. Elk striploin, one of the most popular requests, comes with baby roasted fingerling potatoes, a Saskatoon berry

glaze and grilled asparagus.

A 15-minute drive from Lake Louise Ski Area, the restaurant is set in a rustic cabin built in the 1930s with wooden beams. An adjacent, even older, connected cabin serves as a lounge. Ambience and character score high points, as does the assortment of loose-leaf teas, ice cream and sorbet, all available year-round.

"We make our own ice cream here, from scratch, as well as sorbet," said chef Kelly Strutt, a native of Winnipeg, who, like many Banff residents, came out to ski for a winter and never left.

Never mind that it's not summer, ice cream choices include bourbon brittle and peppermint chocolate chip, while the sorbet selection includes raspberry, black pepper and peach maple.

Caribou, elk and buffalo is the name of the game at Buffalo Mountain Lodge, a 15-minute appetite-inducing or caloric-reducing (depending on your direction) walk from downtown Banff, on the slopes of Tunnel Mountain.

"We're renowned for our game dishes," said executive chef Alistair Barnes, who oversees seven kitchens—three in the mountains, four in Calgary—owned by Canadian Rocky Mountain Resorts. "We have our own game farm of free-

SALTNIK A RARE STEAKHOUSE

221 Bear St., Banff
403/762-2467

Main Courses: \$17-\$34

Most Popular Dish: California
Cut New York Striploin with
Ermite Blue Sauce

Chef: Darryl Beach

Body Type: Muscular—all sorts
of outdoor pursuits

Steak is the specialty at the Saltnik, where Certified Canadian Black Angus—and no other beef but—is served.

"Alberta's Black Angus is renowned for its quality and flavour," said promotions manager Jeff McIntosh. "That's thanks in big part to Alberta's climate and wide open ranges supporting a long, temperature grazing season."

Beyond the beef is a menu that's pub-like with appetizers such as French onion soup, Caesar salad and shrimp cocktail. But McIntosh insists that the Saltnik is unlike any other steakhouse—hence the word "Rare" in the restaurant's name.

"It's tough to classify us," he said. "We've created a niche for ourselves, not as fine dining and not as casual, but high-end casual."

Patrons dine upstairs at hardwood tables in big plush seats under the glitter of hand-blown chandeliers and glass fixtures. Entrées are à la carte, and side dishes, such as wok-seared garlic broccoli or scallop potatoes, tend to be shared around the table.

Downstairs lies the Lik Lounge, where there's a flow of martinis, premium spirits, fresh fruit margaritas, single malt scotches and micro-brewed beer. Live blues and jazz are played here on Thursdays, and a DJ spins old school funk on Sundays.



WALLISER STUBE WINE BAR

The Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise, Lake Louise
403/522-3511, www.fairmont.com/lakelouise

Main Courses: \$25-\$42

Most Popular Dish: Fondue and Raclette

Executive Chef: Dominique Guyot

Body Type: Fit—"It's a large hotel. I have to walk two to three miles a day minimum just getting from one dining room to another. I also have two young sons who keep me going."

Executive chef Dominique Guyot has a seductive, thick French accent. "Fondue and raclette are the icons of the restaurant," he says lyrically. "Here, we do it the authentic Swiss way."

Raclette is a type of cheese that the Chateau imports from Switzerland. It comes round, in a wheel the size of a large dinner plate, served under a heating lamp. Much like fondue, the eating of raclette is a social affair with its roots in the simple Swiss farming folklore, ideal for a group. As the outermost layer of cheese melts and bubbles, those gathered round take turns scraping the molten goo onto a side dish of warm baby potatoes, air-dried beef, gherkins and pickled onions.

Daily, at around 5:00 p.m., the Walliser Stube Wine Bar smells of Switzerland. This is where skiers come for an après fix of wine and cheese and other finger food by the warmth of a large fireplace and a view over Lake Louise. The choice of wine is a library of imports in two floor-to-ceiling-high shelves, \$40 to \$1,000 per bottle. ❄️

