

## A look at the growth of the Boulder dining scene

How Boulder found its inner gourmet  
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Fresh sardines or sea urchin sometimes appear as specials at the Flagstaff House now, as do veal kidneys and blood sausage.

"I'm doing things now that that 20 years ago we could never sell," says Mark Monette, partner and chef at the Flagstaff House, which has been a part of Boulder fine dining since 1971.

Even in the past 10 years, the dining scene in Boulder has undergone such a fundamental change that local restaurants now get national attention somewhat routinely. A rapturous Boulder culinary odyssey recounted by food writer Raymond Sokolov in the Wall Street Journal last month ended with a paragraph calling Boulder the "best small city for great meals we know of in this country," the final sentence a slightly giddy



Diners enjoy the deck at the Flagstaff House. (Jonathan Castner)

says Boulder is more connected to the rest of the country than it once was.

"The world has come to Boulder," he says. "When I came here, it felt like a very sort of distant town, not connected to the outside world."

A national move toward seasonal, local cooking has made gourmet dishes more accessible. As the decade wore on, out went 12-ingredient plates with foams and

smears, and in came the exaltation of cauliflower and pork chops. Boulder, with its well-established farmers' market, was well-poised to serve a public clamoring for fresh, locally sourced meals. And the superiority of local produce was not a surprise to several local chefs, notably Jim Smaller of the Boulder Cork, who had been using farm-fresh produce for years, or John Platt of Q's in the Hotel Boulderado, an avid gardener who also had well-established relationships with local farmers.

"There's always been a strong movement toward local food here, with the farmers' market and farmstands," says John Lehdorff, former dining critic for the Rocky Mountain News and onetime food editor of the Camera. "So you have these savvy diners learning more and more. Then chefs wanted to come here and live," says Lehdorff, who is now a food trends consultant and writer at [johnlehdorff.com](http://johnlehdorff.com)

### Newcomers

In 2004, the Kitchen opened in the spring, and Frasca opened in the summer, and both brought national attention to Boulder. The Kitchen emphasized green practices and the scrupulous sourcing of food, with farmers' names appearing on a restaurant blackboard every day.

"They were very early into the local and sustainable thing," says Denver restaurant consultant Imbergamo. "They were the first ones I heard about to use recycled to-go containers and wind power. Naming every farmer and producer ... They just took it from a marketing standpoint to the next level."

Matheson, co-owner of the Kitchen with Kimbal Musk, says the restaurant's emphasis grew out of the pair's desire to have extremely high quality ingredients, prepared with integrity, and to establish relationships with local suppliers.

"I've always struggled with too many ingredients in a dish," Matheson says. "That was a style of cooking I noticed much more so when I first moved here from London. I remember trying to order some grilled fish with lemon juice in a restaurant. The restaurant just couldn't do it. The first time it came out with blackening and cajun spice. I was just dying for something like a plain piece of grilled fish with lemon and olive oil. (I thought) that's something we can bring. ... (People) want a clarity to their food."

That search for simplicity led directly to the local sourcing and the environmentally friendly practices. However, as businessmen, the potential profitability of such an approach wasn't lost on Musk and Matheson.

"Kimbal understood the marketing value of it," Matheson says.

As for Frasca, co-owners Mackinnon-Patterson and Bobby Stuckey, a master sommelier, had worked at the French Laundry, widely considered to be the best restaurant in the United States.

"In and of itself, Frasca elevated Boulder's dining scene to a national level," Imbergamo says.

Stuckey, who had also worked at The Little Nell, in Aspen, says they chose Boulder largely because of the lifestyle.

He says it seemed like a risky choice at the time. The rent on Pearl Street was higher than a space they looked at in San Francisco. In addition, the culture in Boulder was less restaurant-centric than California's, not to mention more laid-back when it came to fine dining.

"Nobody took reservations," Stuckey says. "Even six years later, Tuesday night at 8:15 is a hard sell. We really were in a pioneer situation."

That said, he and Mackinnon-Patterson have been gratified at how Boulder has embraced Frasca.

"... It's been a really fun experience," Stuckey says.

### Getting the word out

After opening in August, Frasca was already getting national press by January in food magazines such as *Gourmet* and in the *Wall Street Journal*. By April, Mackinnon-Patterson was named by *Food and Wine* as one of the 10 best new chefs in America. The Kitchen also began receiving national press in food magazines, and Musk and Matheson cooked at the James Beard House. Both restaurants were added to Zagat's 2006 dining guide.

Relatively early on, Frasca retained the services of a public relations firm in New York, and the Kitchen hired Kate Lacroix of Dish Publicity and now First Bite Boulder to promote its restaurant. She continued working for the restaurant for five years.

While having professionals handle publicity may have helped to raise the restaurants' profiles, in the end it still came down to the food.

"Says Imbergamo of Frasca's great press: "If it wasn't a great restaurant, all the PR and the French Laundry connections in the world wouldn't have elevated it to the national spotlight."

In 2008, Stuckey, who had received several national awards for wine service, was nominated for outstanding Wine and Spirits Professional by the James Beard Foundation. That year, Mackinnon-Patterson won Best Chef in the Southwest Region of the United States.

Lehdorff says the Kitchen's national reputation is also well-deserved: "(It's) written about as one of the greenest (restaurants), but the food is also very, very good."

Publicist Lacroix got her start in the restaurant world by working in Query's restaurants.

"I credit Dave with giving me my love of food and wine," she says. After a stint working at restaurants in New York in various capacities, she returned to Boulder to work with restaurants on publicity.

"For the Kitchen, the goal overall was to build a fantastic, locally-based community restaurant with national and international appeal," she says, adding that the restaurant's green and local vision was "very clear, very compelling."

### Stepping up the game

Query, who got his start in the business in 1978 working at Mustard's Last Stand, has had his finger on Boulder's restaurant pulse ever since. He opened his first restaurant, The Lick Skillet, in 1989 and now owns the Big Red F restaurant group, which includes Zolo Grill, Centro Latin Kitchen, the West End, Jax Fish House and Happy Noodle House in Boulder, as well as Lola and Jax Fish House in Denver.

He says Boulder has always had good restaurants, but that the town, like the rest of the country has increased its sophistication about food in the last 10 years. Boulder's educated, well-traveled populace and its beautiful scenery have attracted chefs from elsewhere and kept current restaurants working hard to compete.

"If you're not hitting it out of the park every night, you're not going to be around for long," he says. "Someone else will do a better job than you are."

However, he says it was a little disconcerting for longtime restaurateurs here when Boulder was discovered by the national media.

"We always thought there was good food in Boulder," he says. "Mark Monette, John Platt. Those guys are putting their heart and soul into their food."

However, he says of the writeups, without a missing a beat, "It sure hasn't hurt. ... The Kitchen and Frasca have really garnered some national attention. It really helps everybody."

Karen Barela, chief operating officer of Culinary School of the Rockies, agrees that Boulder has always had some bright culinary stars, as well as a vibrant farmers' market.

She sees the Boulder dining scene as a progression rather than a change. The culinary school, which teaches its students farm to table cooking, has become conscious of local ingredients just as local restaurants have.

She adds that she has seen a big improvement in another area of the restaurant scene -- service.

"When I first moved here (in 1989), restaurants were notorious for lousy service," she says. "(Now) some raising of the bar has trickled through all categories. As patrons we respect servers more and vice versa. That's been good for both sides."

### What's next?

What propelled Boulder to its current culinary status was its educated populace, lifestyle amenities and innovative chefs -- old and new -- what would it take for Boulder to rise further?

Query points to Chef Eric Skokan of the Black Cat Bistro as a model of what local chefs may be doing in the future. Skokan, who also received sumptuous praise in the recent *Wall Street Journal* article, supplies his restaurant with produce from his farm on Boulder County Open Space.

"Here is a guy making his job so much harder than he needs to do," Query says. "With the exception of bay leaves, cinnamon and tropical fruit, he's getting it all from his farm. He has taken the game to a whole new level."

Stuckey of Frasca cites a parable of sorts about the development of food culture. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Alice Waters of Berkeley and Odessa Piper of Madison, Wis., both were highly talented chefs promoting seasonal and local cooking. Waters and her restaurant, *Chez Panisse*, became national icons. Piper retained respect among those in the know, but Madison never became a food destination as Berkeley has. Partly, Stuckey says, that's because Berkeley provided more support to its restaurant culture. He'd like to see the same thing happen in Boulder.

He says a big name or two coming to Boulder would accelerate the process, but the embrace by the community and city leaders of new young chefs would also help.

"Hopefully those young entrepreneurs will come here and fall in love (with the city)"

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Bobby Stuckey, co-owner of Frasca Food and Wine, pours champagne for a table of guests. (Jonathan Castner)