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Who knew your computer had such good taste.



Stars Trek

I'd walk a mile -- and then some -- for a meal at the Tennessee Pass Cookhouse.

BY KYLE WAGNER
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Recently I've had to face the fact that I'm never going to climb Everest.

First, there's the problem of my day job, which doesn't exactly allow for the time commitment -- or, for that matter, the tens of thousands of dollars needed to have a guide carry me up there. Then there are my kids, who make the idea of dying at 29,035 feet seem far less intriguing than it did twenty years ago. Not to mention that I have the body of a food critic approaching forty. (On the other hand, my body-fat percentage would keep me way warmer than any of those skinny climber types.)

But knowing all of this doesn't stop me from acting like a wannabe, which means that most evenings after the kids are in bed, I climb vicariously through Savage Arena or Into Thin Air. I hike every chance I get, take my turn on the rock wall at REI, and generally say yes to anything that involves exercise in the great outdoors.

So when two friends told us they'd heard about this yurt in the middle of nowhere that serves food to folks willing to trek in, I was all over it. Never mind that we'd be starting at Ski Cooper, that the hike wouldn't even be a mile long, and that once we arrived at the Tennessee Pass Cookhouse, we'd be eating goat cheese with pesto instead of yak

Kyle Wagner



There's no business like snow business: Inside the Tennessee Pass Cookhouse.

Kyle Wagner



The outside of the Tennessee Pass Cookhouse.

Details

Tennessee Pass Cookhouse
Details: 1-719-486-8114
Hours: 5-9 p.m. daily, 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Saturday, Thanksgiving-late April 5-9 p.m. Thursday-Sunday, late June-early October

Four-course prix fixe meal (per person) \$55
Cocoa with peppermint schnapps \$4
Wine (per bottle) \$20
Where: Tennessee Pass



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butter with tinned sardines. I could use my new snowshoes. I'd be breathing clean, cold air at 10,600 feet. I'd get some exercise in an area that has no stoplights, no car exhaust, no retail opportunities. And the only other people we'd see would be the two dozen or so diners that the yurt/eatery can accommodate every evening.

Ryer Triezenberg and Ty Hall built the yurt from a kit (with some help from a chef friend, Don Stephens, who has since moved on) back in 1995. Before that, Triezenberg spent eight years at the successful, and similar, Pine Creek Cookhouse in Ashcroft, outside of Aspen. But while Pine Creek has running water, electricity and a food-storage area so that chefs are able to bring ingredients up on snowmobiles and cook there, Triezenberg and Hall have to prepare much of their food ahead of time in a kitchen, then haul it to the yurt.

Like the restaurants at a ski area, the yurt has a permit to operate on Forest Service land. Diners must make reservations and then stop at Ski Cooper's cross-country center, where the, um, athletically challenged can climb onto a snowmobile (the restaurant used to do the horse-drawn-sleigh thing but decided it was too much work). Everyone else dons snowshoes or cross-country skis (the center offers them free of charge to dinner guests who arrive empty-footed), and it's off into the woods for a gain of about 400 feet in elevation on a wide, well-groomed trail.

As we started off, the guys were blazing ahead, the gals hanging back to chat about acupuncture and relationships -- just like it would be on the way to base camp, right? That's when I realized that I'd broken the cardinal rule of gear: When you buy something new, always try it out before you actually have to use it. It turned out that my boots were all wrong for my new snowshoes, so I had to take the snowshoes off and hike in. Pretty soon I was breathing like a St. Bernard playing Frisbee. But, hey, if mountaineer Doug Scott could crawl down a 23,000-foot mountain for six days with two broken legs in a blizzard, certainly I could make it another half a mile under sunny skies to a warm mug of cocoa spiked with peppermint schnapps on the deck of a yurt.

The view from that deck was stunning: a wide, snow-covered field out before us, with a panoramic backdrop stretching from Mt. Elbert and Mt. Massive to Mt. Galena and Mt. Homestake. As the sun slowly made its way down, leaving pink and orange streaks between Galena and Homestake, the smell of baking bread wafted out from the snug little structure. Other diners straggled in: a couple of skiers, then a few snowshoers, then a few more skiers. Everyone on the deck cheered the newcomers, and by the time we

## *this week in Dining*

From the Week of Thursday, March 21, 2002

The Bite  
[The Bite](#)  
Toque Talk

Food Fetishes  
[Food Fetishes](#)  
Rise and Shine

Check, Please!  
[Check, Please!](#)  
Readers give our food critic something to chew on.



**arcola**

Celebrity I resemble most: "John Travolta from the *Urban Cowboy* days."

Find out more about [Cialis](#)

were all called inside for dinner, a college-party camaraderie had formed, no doubt fueled by the friendliness of the schnapps.

Inside, the yurt looks like the second home of a classy mountaineer. The owners picked up the almost-antique furniture at shops on South Broadway in Denver, the paintings on the walls were done by a Sherpa friend of Triezenberg's, and the colorful rugs came from Triezenberg's treks in Nepal. The duo also tracked down a 1930s Magic Chef stove to cook on and a pot-bellied wood-burning stove for the dining area that, once it was fired up, made us feel as if we were sitting in the belly of a really big yak.

Diners choose their entrees when they make reservations so that Triezenberg and Hall know exactly what they need to bring in each evening. A quartet of entrees are offered for the prix fixe meal -- \$55 per person brings four courses and just-baked, millet-studded, brown-bread rolls -- and there are no seconds on anything except water and alcohol. (Our two bottles of wine, both Stone Creek reds, were value priced at \$20 each.) Everyone started with the same appetizer course: a platter that contained fresh strawberries, grapes, jicama shards, marinated portobello mushrooms and wild-boar sausage with mustard, as well as a smaller plate of fat, puffy slices of pizza topped with goat cheese and pesto. The second course was our choice of a carrot soup that sported the mildest of curry bites, or a simple mixed-greens salad topped with goat cheese and a chunky, mint-kissed pear dressing.

Since there were four in our group, we'd decided to order all four of the entree possibilities and share them. Fortunately for our friendship, they all came up winners. The best was the rack of Colorado lamb: four chops of plush, juicy meat that had been treated to the faintest seasoning of salt and pepper so that all we could really taste was that sweet flesh. The runner-up was the grilled elk tenderloin, incredibly tender slips dotted with squishy blueberries and their thin reduction. But the salmon and chicken were worthy, too: The huge piece of fish had been cooked just shy of dry and had a mild flavor that marked it as fresh, while the moist, oven-roasted quarter chicken came surrounded by big pieces of mushroom that had been cooked down in the bird's juices.

Buttery Yukon gold mashed potatoes, skin-on and chunky-style, adorned two of our entree plates, while the other two boasted big piles of wild rice pumped up with slivered almonds and plump, sweet raisins. And all four entrees came with a vegetable medley that included steamed Brussels sprouts, tiny baby carrots and snow peas.

We refrained from polishing off the sides so that we'd have room for dessert: homemade pie, with a rich crust holding in strawberries and a real-whipped-cream topping. Another round of cocoa with peppermint schnapps, and we were ready to step out into the single-digit temperature for the trek back down to Ski Cooper.

By now I had a buzz, and the seemingly much more rapid return trip was a bit blurry. I remember that the stars were so breathtakingly bright through the trees that we declined headlamps

and made our way by instinct, feeling the snow crunch and letting the cold air sober us up. And I definitely recall thinking that cocoa with peppermint schnapps would be the perfect thing for my next snowy hike.

David Breashears, eat your heart out. Better yet, eat at the Tennessee Pass Cookhouse.

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