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Rocky Mountain Haute Cuisine

Truffles and saffron edge out Red Zinger tea and granola in Boulder

By RAYMOND SOKOLOV

Boulder, Colo.

This used to be the hippiest, dippiest town around. The home of a Buddhist university, a public university and Red Zinger tea, over a mile high in the Rockies and also just plain high, Boulder embraced New Age culture like few other places. But a new aroma now fills the downtown Pearl Street pedestrian mall, and it comes from truffles and saffron, not cannabis. A gourmet revolution has edged out the cultural revolution.

Take it as a sign that within the same month, Black Cat restaurant chef-owner Eric Skokan cooked dinner at the James Beard House in New York, but only three nude joggers showed up with pumpkins over their heads for the once-thronged Halloween Naked Pumpkin Run.

Downtown Boulder is the scene of a high-end food fight among dozens of ambitious eateries of all stripes. In the Pearl Street Mall, the plucky interloper Salt is struggling to win small-plate and casual-epicure honors from the category trailblazer the Kitchen, which simmers along a few steps away. At the more-formal end of the scale (although nothing ever gets truly starchy in this metropolitan area of 300,000), three terrific restaurants vie for the food dollars of the better-heeled.

How has this gastro-boom happened? This toned-up exurb 40 minutes to the northwest of Denver is home to plenty of well-shod, well-fixed folks eager to feed themselves with discrimination. Take it as a sign that there are three offices of Raymond James, the financial-advice firm, scattered within an easy walk of all but one of the city's leading restaurants.

That lone wolf looks down on Boulder's twinkling lights from the lip of a mini-Alp.

Flagstaff House is the grande dame of fine dining hereabouts, yet its stylish and elaborate food has its detractors. We disagree, strongly. We didn't mind at all having black truffle grated profusely over perfect handmade gnocchi linked in light sauce with stupendous pieces of matsutake mushrooms, redolent of the Pacific Northwest forests where foragers have been known to kill for these treasures. Nor did we think that the slow-cooked egg in a gratin crust was a silly stunt. Or that the trio of Colorado lamb parts, including shredded shank, with kale was an unfocused clutter. We focused intently on each delicious morsel.

We were surprised at first that the wait staff in so refined a place were so young, but they did a fine job and lightened things up with spirit and cheerfulness. Our sommelier was an unpretentious but deeply informed enthusiast for his decidedly fairly priced list.

So Flagstaff was no backwater of showy food. But in the bright light of day, you got hipper, brisker culinary offerings at

the Kitchen and at Salt. The vibe in both places is locavore and ecologically correct. Each of Salt's menu items is listed with its purveyor. The burger's beef was grass-fed by Lasater Ranch. The bacon with the caramelized local onion and goat cheese flatbread comes from Long Farm. Many dishes, such as the autumn vegetable cassoulet (Munson Farm) are wood roasted.

The Kitchen trumpets its virtues even louder. You cannot eat there without learning that it is 100% wind-powered and that its cooking oils power a staffer's car. Composting scraps is S.O.P.

Caring barely at all about this self-righteous posturing, we just loved the roasted Munson Farm squash "farroto," a proto-wheat analogue to risotto spiced with Fresno chili, cilantro and toasted-cumin yogurt. If the man who thought this up fueled his Bentley with the rendered fat of endangered songbirds, we would still line up to eat his food. His flatbread is better than Salt's, too. Although Salt, which opened just before Labor Day, is five years younger than the Kitchen, the freshness and verve prizes go to the oldcomer.

For a major meal in Boulder, you'd be wise to walk around the corner, disregard the loopy storefront display that includes a manual typewriter, and leap into Black Cat's bold but brilliantly tasty menu. Chef Skokan earned his spurs at top places in his native Virginia and D.C., and he knows what is going on in kitchens far from the Flatiron crags that he sees on his current horizon. But Black Cat is not a clone of any bigger-city bistro.

Mr. Skokan's secret isn't a matter of cutting-edge technique, although he isn't shy about slow-cooking beets until they taste more like beets than any you've bitten into before. You get a forecast of how successfully he manipulates his locavore ingredients (grown on the restaurant's own farm in nearby Niwot) if you order the intense carrot soup with croutons infused with the Moroccan hot sauce harissa. Coating a Pacific sturgeon steak with pistachio is a neat trick, but the moist, veal-resembling fish, so carefully handled here, is most of the point of the effort at Black Cat.

Two lucky folks in our party shared the slow-cooked pork shoulder, which was Mr. Skokan's answer to pulled pork barbecue. There is a place for both versions of falling-apart, high-flavored pork, but Mr. Skokan's raises the dish to a hitherto-unknown level of serious sophistication.

If that weren't enough for one mountain town, there's Frasca. It bills itself as a "neighborhood restaurant inspired by the cuisine and culture of Friuli," the northern Italian region that borders and reflects Austria and Slovenia. Does this sound narrow and provincial—a sliver cuisine from an Italian backwater reproduced in a neighborhood mini-mall in Colorado's 11th-largest municipality by a chef with the very non-Friulian monicker of Lachlan Mackinnon-Patterson? Well, this Celtic-fringe hyphenate restaurateur was the Beard Awards' best chef in the Southwest last year, and he can rightfully claim the Friulian thing as *cosa mia*.

We were lucky enough to be on hand for the first of two totally booked seatings for one of Signor Mackinnon-Patterson's Monday wine dinners. On hand as well was the adventuresome winemaker Marco Zanetti of Vigna Dogarina, 20 miles east of Venice. As accompaniments to the \$45 four-course meal, we tasted four of his small-production wines, all of them way out of the mainstream march to global wine uniformity (\$21 for the flight).

The antipasto course was a chicken soup garnished with cauliflower, saffron and chicken "conserva" (Venetian chicken canned in olive oil, like tuna). It didn't sound like much in a world full of pistachio-crusting sturgeon, but it was the most flavorful, rich chicken soup of my experience. We moved on to a superlative risotto with root vegetables, each one standing up for itself with power and dignity. There was an equally remarkable pork roast, with black lentils, celery, apple and pan juices, followed by an apple cake (yes, made from a local orchard's apples), with toasted (nonlocal) cashews and a vanilla-bean gelato.

That must sound like a very plain meal with a few unusual ingredients to jazz it up, but I can only say that it was simply the best food we had in a splendid few days in the best small city for great meals we know of in this country. This chef's secret is the old-fashioned one. He treats fine ingredients with respect, knowledge and high craft. Viva Lachlan!

—Ray welcomes emails at eatingout@wsj.com; due to volume, however, he can't reply to requests for individual dining recommendations.

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