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Ski food gets a lift

Resorts raise the bar with gourmet offerings — and not just at upscale restaurants

By Yvette Cardozo, Special to Tribune Newspapers

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Once upon a time, ski food meant greasy \$3 hamburgers and chili, even at major resorts. Well, the hamburgers and chili are still there, but these days they're made of Kobe beef and cost upward of \$15.

And it's not only gourmet, \$20-a-plate restaurants that are dishing out decent food. Just about every eatery has its own hook with some pretty yummy fare.

I recently was at The Mill Cafe, one of the on-slope restaurants at California's Mammoth Mountain near Yosemite National Park, when a guy in his early 20s, well over 6 feet and hardly 180 pounds, pointed excitedly to a dish in the cafeteria line.

"That," he said, his eyes gleaming, "and that and that and that."

Though he added grilled chicken breasts and salad and potatoes to the mix, the star on his plate was the smoked tri-tip beef.

Yeah, I ordered it, too, and it turned out to be the best meal I've had on a ski hill without paying big bucks at a waiter-served place.

The juicy, tender slices of beef had just enough smoke to give them flavor; they melted in my mouth and came with a killer dipping sauce.

Be still my growling stomach.

But there was more. On busy days and weekends, Mammoth hauls out its burrito cat.

It's a bright orange food truck on snow treads that serves up four flavors of burritos for a quick on-slope snack.

For the more gourmet-minded, there's the snowcat dinner. Picture a bus on snow treads and you've got a passenger snowcat. It takes diners to 9,600 feet, where you find Mammoth's ultragourmet Parallax restaurant, usually reserved for Black Pass owners.

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Black Pass? A paltry \$10,000 for membership gets you favored parking, permission to cut lift lines, concierge service and lunch at Parallax.

But for the rest of us, a typical \$89 snowcat dinner at Parallax will serve up wild arugula salad with goat cheese, maple- and peppercorn-crested duck breast or rack of lamb followed by chocolate soup — yes, soup.

Why is all this good food available?

Perhaps you can credit Deer Valley in Utah.

This is the place that invented ski luxe. There were telephones on lift poles here in the early 1980s so skiers could stay connected, well before skiers could pull cellphones out of their pockets. There were ski packages that included butlers. And, of course, there were gourmet buffets with half a dozen kinds of mushrooms.

People shook their heads when the lodge opened, with its brass bathroom fixtures, original oil paintings and gourmet ski food. But it didn't take long for other resorts to copy the idea.

And now we get to the much-sought-after, three-times-weekly Fireside Dining meals at Deer Valley's Empire Lodge.

This takes ski dining to unheard of levels.

Begin with the architecture: a 35,000-square-foot lodge filled with what has become the prerequisite ski luxe decor of cedar planking, heavy beams, peeled logs and, of course, massive fieldstone fireplaces. These fireplaces are the focus of the dining experience.

First, the cheese. Huge rounds of raclette sit on the hearth, slowly melting and dribbling onto plates. The fragrance is so sharp, you catch your breath while dropping boiled potatoes, pickles, tiny onions, bread and Swiss meats onto your plate.

Take a plate of cheese, some homemade mustard and dig in. But not too much; this is just the appetizer.

Then it's on to the next fireplace, where you find steaming bowls of stews, thick with tender chunks of lamb, chicken or veal that swim alongside mushrooms, leeks and roasted tomatoes.

And finally — sheesh, can there be room for more? — dessert. This is at the third fireplace, where pots of bubbling chocolate and caramel sit alongside huge strawberries, slices of apples and bananas and assorted dried fruits.

Whew.

Daytime food at Deer Valley isn't bare-bones either. At midmountain, Royal Street Cafe's signature Dungeness crab tower is something to behold. Six inches of crab layered with avocado, tomato, sprouts, wontons, ginger and soy. And there's a maple bacon barbecue bison burger.

More?

There's Utah's High West Distillery in Park City. It's a ski-in, ski-out saloon that makes vodka and

whiskey on the side. Yes, you can ski or ride to the place.

Both the Quit 'N Time and Creole trails at Park City Mountain Resort funnel you into town, where you cross a bridge (still on skis or board), then click out and cross a narrow street to the distillery's front door.

There's food. There's booze. There are tours each afternoon. You go backstage, so to speak, and get to see the copper-pot still and learn just how whiskey and vodka are made.

If you're hungry, there are, among other tasties, bourbon- and coffee-glazed cod or whiskey-cider-braised short ribs. And there's a whiskey tasting, which gets you a sampling of High West's unique blends. Some spicy. Some smooth. All intriguing.

There was, of course, so much more to be tasted on our ski trip: the Kobe beef burger at Legends Bar & Grill at the Park City Mountain Resort, the lamb stew from At The Farm at the Canyons Resort in Park City, the full page of flowering teas at, of all places, Ghidotti's Italian restaurant near Park City.

And best, it was all guilt-free. We had skied all day. We deserved to eat all night.

If you go

Parallax Snowcat Dinners at Mammoth Mountain Resort: The dinners run Fridays, Saturdays and holidays at \$79, but \$29 for ages 12 and younger. 800-626-6684, tinyurl.com/ap669lw

Deer Valley Resort Fireside Dining: Wednesdays through Saturdays. \$58, but \$28 for 11 and younger, not including beverages. A small extra fee gets you a 15-minute sleigh ride for as many as six people. 435-645-6632, deervalley.com

High West Distillery & Saloon, 435-649-8300, highwest.com

Ghidotti's Italian restaurant, 435-647-2908, billwhiterestaurantgroup.com

Mammoth Mountain: 800-626-6684, mammothmountain.com

Park City Mountain Resort, 435-649-8111, parkcitymountain.com

Canyons Resort: 435-649-5400, canyonresort.com

Park City: 800-453-1360, parkcityinfo.com.

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