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CELEBRATED CHEFS WHO CALL THE MOUNTAINS HOME

Investing in community and boosting culinary opportunities help classic Colorado towns shine

By Rebecca Toy

For these chefs, crafting dishes in Colorado's high country is about elevating cuisine – and opportunities – in some of the most beautiful places in the world. Sure, there are the shared headaches of getting suppliers to transport goods past the Front Range and the doldrums of the mud seasons. Yet, it is also a chance to connect with local farmers and ranchers and to curate comforting menus with a sense of place and season. There is also a sense of community and unparalleled mountain access in towns tucked into the state's peaks and valleys.

ROOTED IN BRECKENRIDGE



Chef Matt Vawter

Walking into the historic house on Main Street feels like rolling up to a vibrant dinner party. Matt Vawter, the 2024 James Beard Best Chef: Mountain, and his team have created a space – Rootstalk – that can serve a divine seven-course tasting menu or a laid-back nosh with a juicy happy-hour burger.

It's fitting because this is a homecoming story. Vawter grew up in Breckenridge before attending the Colorado Mountain College's Culinary Institute in Keystone and heading to Denver to hone his craft. Despite success, Breck remained on his mind: raising



kids in a small town, skiing, mountain biking, and seeing those mountains every morning. He and his family made the move in 2020.

Like so many in this interwoven valley, Vawter has focused on contributing to a sustainable lifestyle, noting he received local scholarships and support from the town in his young career. He and the team give back, but the culture starts with the 85 team members at Rootstalk and sister restaurant Radicato.

"What we're most proud of is the environment we're creating with our team, a place to learn and build a profession," Vawter says. The enthusiasm is undeniable, his voice picking up speed when he mentions employees buying homes and working on wellness.

"I left this town not because of lifestyle. I loved it. I left because the pro opportunities weren't there. Now, hopefully no one has to make those same decisions." ■

TELLURIDE PRIDE



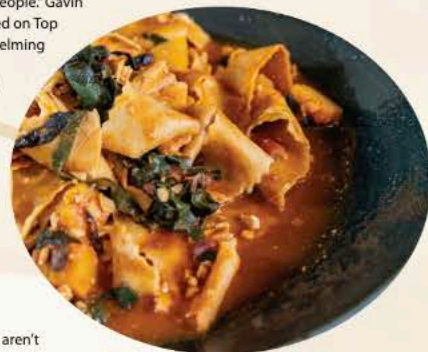
Chef Eliza Gavin

Chef Eliza Gavin chided a passing friend who was distracting her as she described her life in the mountains, banishing him by declaring he looked like a big grape in his snow gear. It captured the connections in Telluride. For Gavin, this is the town where her son can go fishing with his friends, and she knows the community is watching out for him and each other.

Raised in Richmond, Virginia, she has trained and worked in restaurants around the world but always thought Colorado had the "nicest, nicest people." Gavin has written three cookbooks and competed on Top Chef, Beat Bobby Flay and Chopped. But helming a mountain restaurant through seasonal staffing challenges for 24 years is no small feat. Yet, she and her team – some in the kitchen have been with her for a decade – have created an iconic fine dining spot. As high-end restaurant remodels abound, 221 Oak St continues to attract guests with its historic Victorian home and a spectacular garden patio.

Part of her drive comes from the relationships her team built with returning guests to 221 Oak St., and her newer casual diner named Liz. Creativity also fuels her passion. "I love how we're constantly pivoting and changing, making things more fun and accessible," Gavin says. Culinary classes at the high school, 14-course wine pairings, and setting up a wedding catering kitchen on the top of a mountain: Gavin clearly delights in it all.

That's part of Telluride's draw. "You can be quirky," Gavin says. "People aren't going to draw and quarter you for doing this. You can test your boundaries." ■



LIFE'S GRAND JUNCTIONS

Josh Niernberg never planned to stay in Grand Junction. He and his wife moved from the Front Range where Niernberg ran restaurants. They were going to help his father-in-law list and sell a restaurant and then return to the Denver area. A recession slowed those plans down, and then the possibilities on the Western Slope took hold.

Niernberg was compelled by local sourcing before the farm-to-table trend became popular. The valley allowed his crew to create a strategic menu focusing on the ranchers, farmers, and other growers around Grand Junction. The couple opened Bin 707 Foodbar in 2011 with the same ethos.

Surrounded by Colorado wine country as well as grains and harvest from across the high desert states, Niernberg has the range to experiment. "Being in a place that is not specific to major food trends and food media cycles gave us room to make mistakes and find our way and decide what we wanted to do," he explains. "These preconceived notions of what you can and can't do. We just don't have that."

Sixteen years later, Niernberg has four James Beard nominations — including 2025 — and Bin 707 Foodbar, and his other restaurant, Taco Party, have helped reshape Grand Junction. For his family, the move has been just as positive. "The quality of life is just outrageous," he says. "It's so much slower and more comfortable than the city that we left behind." ■



Chef Josh Niernberg

