

Remote Culinary Resorts Are the New Wellness Retreat

Swanky rural getaways like Paws Up in Montana have upped their game with intimate, star-powered culinary experiences for affluent guests.

By **Sara Ventiera** | Updated May 29, 2019



PHOTO: THE RESORT AT PAWS UP

It's a gray and drizzling spring morning at The Resort at Paws Up. Outside a herd of bison and their crimson calves are grazing on fresh pasture, as five

guests take a seat at rows of tables set up like a classroom. As part of the resort's Wonder Women of Food & Wine weekend, recent James Beard Award Outstanding Pastry winner Kelly Fields of Willa Jean in New Orleans and *The Final Table* star Amninder Sandhu, owner of Arth in Mumbai, are performing a cooking demo.

While Fields offers tips on how to make her burrata and buttered crab tart, and Sandhu explains the diversity of Indian cuisine while showing guests how to make a traditional Kerala fish pickle, Ellen Bennett, owner of chef wear purveyor Hedley & Bennett, writes out notes on a large notepad and assists.

The previous day, James Beard Award finalist Valerie Gordon of Valerie Confections in Los Angeles hosted her own hands-on, kid-friendly blueberry corn cobbler demo, before joining the group for a multi-course collaborative dinner alongside the Paws Up team, now overseen by Sunny Jin, an alum of French Laundry, El Bulli, and Tetsuya's Restaurant in Sydney, Australia.

It's an impressive group of chefs from around the globe for such a small shoulder season audience, but that's almost the point.

With its cattle drives, world-class fly fishing (*A River Runs Through It* was filmed on one of the property's rivers), rappelling, ATV tours, and more, Paws Up already has plenty of activities and amenities that have been attracting affluent city slickers—including celebrities like Gwyneth Paltrow and Ludacris—seeking a luxury Dude Ranch experience.

And as American culture has become increasingly food-conscious to the point where nearly every half-decent hotel has a celebrity chef-run restaurant, swanky resorts like Paws Up have been driven to up their game with intimate, engaging culinary experiences for their wealthy guests.

“It's exclusivity and creating a narrative,” says Herb Karlitz, president of Karlitz & Co, a luxury event planning firm. “It's what that experience is that's going to let me do something that my friend can't do.”

These sort of high-flyers no longer want to just watch the Dallas Cowboys play from a VIP box while noshing on snacks catered by trendy restaurants, they want to arrive in Texas on Jerry Jones' private jet and be personally served by chef Dean Fearing at his namesake restaurant—an actual evening Karlitz organized for one of his billionaire clients.

Those who can't afford to take over an NFL owner's aircraft for a night or don't care to can pay upwards of \$1,000 on top of their room to experience intimate dinners hosted by the likes of Daniel Humm and Will Guidara of Eleven Madison Park, Nancy Silverton, and José Andrés at legendary culinary destination Blackberry Farm, one of the resorts that led the way for these sort of high-end, almost-off-the-grid guest experiences.

Many of the comfortable patrons that fork over the \$1,875 for The Alisal Guest Ranch & Resort's BBQ Boot Camp have already made other trips across the United States to sample regional barbecue in its home environment. The draw of the biannual Santa Maria barbecue-focused retreat and other similar events is that these folks, who can dine wherever they please, get to mix-and-mingle with the chefs while snapping #ranchlife selfies and sleeping on 1,000 thread count sheets.

“These culinary excursions, whether on a cruise ship or at a very high-end ranch, have an immersive quality, a 360-degree experience, that is so much more than you can experience at home,” says Gordon, who teaches and cooks at The Alisal's BBQ Bootcamp, Lake Austin Spa Resort and Paws Up's Montana Master Grillers. “It's almost like 4D.”

In a world where everyone is told to focus on being present and reconnecting with nature, the people who have the resources to access these experiences can one-up the general public—and, at Paws Up in rural Montana, still post Instagram pics on WiFi that's faster than what I have at my home in Los Angeles.

At Kokomo Private Island Resort in Fiji vacationers can participate in

traditional Fijian kava ceremonies on the beach and hike with a medicine man. And SLS Beverly Hills offers a three-day Be Epicurean package featuring a foraging trip in Angeles National Forest with a locally renowned expert.

While it has been offering culinary weekends with guest chefs for more than half a decade, over the past two years, Paws Up has been reconfiguring its entire culinary program in an attempt to rival regional food-obsessed Blackberry Farm. Under the leadership of Jin, the chefs have given up mimicking trends they think private jet owners want. Now they are working to develop an edible narrative with a sense of place—because that’s what private jet owners actually want.

“Our culinary program wasn’t a failure, but it wasn’t exciting or engaging,” says managing director Steve Hurst, who took over about two years ago. “It wasn’t trying to tell new stories.”

Since Jin came aboard a year and a half ago, the resort—where glamping tents start at about \$1,000 per-person per-night—has been trying to make the dining experiences more captivating with foraged ingredients scoured from nearby forests and themed live-fire-centric dinners spanning from Americana-style barbecue to reinterpretations of the traditional chuckwagon cookouts that sustained the pioneers who passed through the region on the Oregon Trail. Jin and Hurst are also implementing new sunset dining experiences this year atop a cliff that requires an ATV ride or hike to get there, says Jin, “We want to offer one-off experiences.”

That includes its exclusive culinary retreats like BBQ U with chef Sam Huff, who instructs guests how to work a smoker over the course of three days; Bounty on the Blackfoot with Brooke Williamson and Phil Rosenthal; and the annual Montana Master Chefs NYC in the fall. This year, the latter will bring together LaRina Pastificio & Vino chef Silvia Barban; PJ Calapa, chef of Scampi and the Spaniard; Suzanne Cupps, executive chef at Untitled; Cafe Clover’s Garrison Price and Colleen Grapes; and authors and spirit experts David Wondrich and Noah Rothman.

It might sound odd that somewhere between 80% to 90% of the guests who attend the New York City-inspired event—many of whom live in New York—fly all the way to Montana to eat food from chefs whose restaurants they can visit whenever they want. But that’s the idea. They’re getting the high-end dining experiences they enjoy at home with closer access and something that’s become seemingly impossible to attain in urban life: quality time to bond with family and other folks who share similar interests.

“It gives our guests the ability to connect with someone they’re inspired by, whether they’re shooting or fishing with the chef,” says Hurst. “And chefs see it as a cool story they can tap into.” The simple sure can cost a lot.