

BIG SKY COUNTRY

BY STEVE BRAMUCCI



The author rides on horseback through the Blackfoot Valley

THE ANNUAL MONTANA MASTER CHEFS EVENT AT THE RESORT AT PAWS UP BRINGS TOGETHER FINE FOOD AND PASTORAL LIVING.

As an avid fly fisherman, the chance to visit Montana's Blackfoot River conjured one clear image in my head: a thousand crystalline droplets of water scattering as a trout fights the invisible line pulling it steadily toward shore. That image comes courtesy of the book (and later, film) *A River Runs Through It*, which is set on the Blackfoot and has long been a part of the fly fisherman's starter kit. Over the past 10 years, I have gone fly fishing at least 100 times and never once have I gone without pausing to consider Norman Maclean, the book's author, and his brother, Paul, wading over rocks worn smooth by the current, casting in a four-count rhythm and hoping for a fish to rise.

In the spirit of Paul Maclean, a character who Norman paints as endlessly unpredictable, my first trip to Montana came together on a whim. I'd rushed to cancel other plans and shuffle flights the second the offer to join the Montana Master Chefs at Paws Up had come along. The opportunity to fish on the Blackfoot was the main reason I signed

up but the quality of food implied by the phrase "Master Chefs" ran a close second. This annual four-day event, held at the beginning of October, has gained increasing notoriety over the past seven years. There's plenty of reason for the buzz – The Resort at Paws Up has done a great job attracting top-tier chefs from across the country to come and share their skills. These chefs are each paired with a vineyard and together they present a meal, course by succulent course. When I booked my ticket I still didn't have any details beyond "fishing and food" – but those alone were enough to send my anticipation skyrocketing.

After an easy flight and a 40-minute ride from the Missoula Airport to the resort, I was delivered to one of Paws Up's stand-alone "wilderness estates." Put simply: It was wonderful. The cabin was well appointed and incredibly spacious, with no detail left unattended. It was a seamless blend of five-star luxury and pastoral living; at its heart it was still just a cabin in the woods, which is precisely what I loved about it. More than just a break from the pace of Southern California,



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my porch and fireside were a break from reality altogether. With the light starting to fall, I noticed that it was time for dinner. I went to my bedroom for a shower, which, at the sight of the massive tub, was instantly upgraded to a bath. There are places you can go which give you no choice but to slow down, relax and breathe. Paws Up is one of them.

As the first round of wine was poured at dinner, the opening night chef, Paws Up's own Wes Coffel, came out to introduce his first dish, while the vintner from Frog's Leap Winery spoke about the wine and why it fit "just so" with the food. Even in these luxurious trappings, nothing was the least bit pretentious – especially the people. This can be evidenced by the fact that I didn't feel judged at all for not having a clue what "squab" was when it was served. (It's a young roast pigeon and also very delicious, in case you're similarly unenlightened.) Conversations at the table were lively – as meals tend to be when you put people who love food, wine and the outdoors in a situation that highlights their passions so strongly. After dinner I wandered back to the bar where the assorted members of a bluegrass band were already plucking at their guitars. Everyone danced, raved about dinner and drank more wine. "These," I decided, "are my kind of folks."

Like summer camp for adults, Montana Master Chefs is laid out in blocks of activities. My first foray out onto the ranch's endless acreage was on horseback. The horses never went faster than a trot, but the pace was fine with me. The silence – broken only by the unhurried clopping of hooves – carved out time for reflection amongst the endless expanses. On Saturday afternoon, I went to shoot sporting clays with a couple visiting from Mexico City. As we collected our shotguns, they told me that they'd been

shooting a few times before. I, on the other hand, had never shot anything more powerful than a BB gun at the state fair. Shooting sporting clays helps answer the question that every man secretly asks himself, "Is it possible that I'm actually a dead-eye?" It turns out that I am not actually a dead-eye, but I still had a fantastic time. We kept up the shooting for about two hours, enough that by the end of the session, I looked like I sort of knew what I was doing.

The major success of the afternoon was that this excursion was enough to get me hungry for dinner. I would need it. That night, two past winners from the Bravo TV series "Top Chef," Stephanie Izard and Hosea Rosenberg, took turns making dishes for the guests. Their meal lasted through 11 courses, all but two of which were paired with wine from Stag's Leap winery. After the marathon meal, one of the best I've ever enjoyed, it was back to the bar, where Stag's Leap continued to pour reds and whites. It was an extremely late night that would be followed by an extremely early morning. Call time for fly fishing was 6 a.m.

My favorite line from *A River Runs Through It* has always been when Paul Maclean declares, "In Montana, there are three things we're never late for: church, work and fishing." I like that motto and wouldn't have been late for my first Montana fishing trip for anything in the world. My promptness came as at least a slight surprise to the Paws Up guide. Over the course of the weekend, he had seen more cancellations than eager fishermen, likely due to the fact that the temperatures had recently plummeted. By the time I hit the river, it had bottomed out to around six degrees. Still, there was plenty of beauty to be appreciated amidst all the shivering. The water was clear and the ponderosa pines loomed mightily above the banks. Once in a while a trout would dart out into the current, deftly angling its body, hunting for

food. Finally, a fish rose to the surface to take my fly. I was overjoyed. I set the hook and began to reel my adversary in.

I wish I could report that it was a tremendous battle of epic proportions. But it wasn't. From the second he clamped down on the fly, my fish was resigned to his fate. More than that, he seemed overjoyed about the idea of getting to the frying pan – just for the chance to warm up.

Weeks later it dawned on me that exploring passions (and maybe finding a few new ones) is really what the Montana Master Chefs event is all about. Over the span of four days, I'd gotten the chance to savor unbelievable food, relax by the fire with a good book, taste wine well outside my pay grade, and learn how to properly prepare a lobster mushroom. I had even caught a fish in the Blackfoot River – a highlight that hung above all the rest. It was dedication to his passions that kept Norman Maclean fishing on the Blackfoot River deep into his old age. I may never be the fisherman he was, but I value my own passions just as strongly. Which is why I find myself wistfully dreaming of returning to the Montana Master Chefs very soon.