

# FOOD & WINE

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## The Small Religious Community that Supplies Some of Montana's Best Restaurants



Dan Goldberg

*Chefs are taking notice of the old-school agricultural traditions of the Hutterites.*

**Hannah Walhout** October 12, 2017

Chef Ben Jones is planning an unusual spring break for next year. He's staying close to his Montana home—but instead of taking his family to hot springs or ski slopes, he'll be driving them up to the tiny town of Rudyard, less than 50 miles from the Canadian border. If all goes according to plan, they'll spend the week at Cool Springs Colony, a rural enclave populated by members of a communal religious sect called the Hutterites.

Montana has close to 50 such colonies, or *bruderhofs* in the old Hutterisch, some a mere 90 minutes outside major hitching posts like Helena—but in this state, whose scale and beauty is unfailingly, almost comically grand, 90 minutes can feel a world away. Especially when you're entering Hutterite country; making inroads into that community is rarely easy. The Hutterites are an Anabaptist group with around 450 enclaves scattered across the Great Plains, and they tend to keep to themselves.

It should be noted that Chef Ben Jones is not a Hutterite. A veteran of the hardscrabble chef grind, Jones first came to Montana many years ago for a stay in rehab—a choice that got him back on track with his fine-dining ambitions, launching him to stints at Chicago's Tru and as the opening Chef de Cuisine of The Lobby at The Peninsula Hotel. Now, he's in Montana for good, admiring the blossoming restaurant scene and local food movement—"I guess the food from around Missoula kinda brought me back!"—as the Executive Chef of Paws Up, a ranch resort occupying 37,000 acres of wilderness in the Blackfoot Valley.



courtesy of The Resort at Paws Up

That pristine region is also home to many Hutterite farmers, who—though less known than similar groups like the Amish and the Mennonites—exert an influence on the landscape and lifestyle of this area. Like those groups, the Hutterites have a long history of fleeing persecution; during the so-called “Radical Reformation” in the wake of the Protestant movement, they were one of many sects to take Martin Luther’s teachings even further—eschewing religious institutions almost completely and founding isolated communal colonies around Central Europe. Their policy of pacifism and ideas rejecting organized religion made them a target over the years, and they moved around the continent quite a bit before settling in North America in the late 19th century. Since then, they’ve lived mostly free from outside interference, working in the agricultural sector to maintain their independent livelihoods.

Jones' interest in Hutterites began for practical reasons: they're great farmers, and he wanted great product. "Overall," he says, "I am driving a 'local first' purchasing philosophy"—and he believes that building connections with trusted growers and ranchers is what brings his food alive. In Montana, Hutterites are some of the most consistent and experienced growers and ranchers around, working the same land as they did 100 years ago and continuing an agricultural tradition that goes back centuries. Paws Up had done business with Hutterite farmers before Jones' arrival, and he was excited to deepen the relationship—even staying with his main liaison in the community, Jake Waldner, as that colony split in two and relocated.

So what does a Hutterite farm look like? It's difficult to generalize, since acreage and attitudes toward technology can vary from colony to colony and state to state. To most people, they'll just look like farms—but not a tiny, DIY operation, since the whole colony revolves around and depends upon a good harvest. Some are organic, some aren't—some are 100 acres, others 10,000. A guarantee, though, is that the farms are collective and provide for all the Hutterites who live there. The tools and the products are held in common; the produce and livestock raised there feeds the colony first; and no outside employees are brought in to help. Regardless of how the farming is done on any particular colony, you can be sure that people care deeply about the process and the product of this sacred relationship with the land. Usually, the overseer of the farm has a spot on the advisory board of the whole colony.

As for what they grow there—for many colonies, moneymaking crops like corn and soybeans are important for maintaining the stability of the community. But since most of these are first and foremost, survival farms, they don't just narrow in on one or two cash crops. Grains are grown both for baking and for feeding the livestock, and most Hutterite farms excel in egg and dairy production while growing fruits and vegetables, too. Meats can be a focus as well and make up the bulk of the items that Jones sources from his Hutterite partners. Hutterite Chicken, especially, pops up as a dish on comfort food menus across the region, and on Chef Jones' menu at Paws Up's fine dining restaurant, where it rests on crispy leeks and juicy grilled peaches. Hutterite bacon is also a prized product—it makes sense that these practical, homesteading farmers would excel at curing and other means of feeding the colony during harsh Montana winters.

These days, Paws Up is the Cool Springs Colony's biggest customer. Chef and farmer meet every week or two to talk shop and discuss the restaurant's needs for the coming months. "Aside from just sheer freshness and quality," says Jones, "they listen to what I want and can customize it for me." Hutterite farmers, with over a century of small-scale farming experience on this land, can work wonders—for example, they can raise heritage livestock breeds larger farms wouldn't bother with, like the Blue Slate turkeys Jones preps for Thanksgiving. And the human connections that overlay this deep agricultural tradition can also open doors to one-of-a-kind products, like Mrs. Waldner's bread—which finds a second life as garlicky croutons. "It's a partnership and a friendship," says the chef. "We care about each other."

Jones isn't the only one who's noticing the quality of Hutterite products. Many chefs around Missoula and Helena are sourcing from these dedicated local farmers; favorites like Red Bird, Scotty's Table and Pearl Cafe are regular customers, as are many specialty food stores and casual joints like Market on Front and Bridge Pizza. Restaurants in Alberta and Manitoba, too—provinces with even more Hutterite colonies, after a mass exodus out of the US due to persecution of conscientious objectors during the First World War. For Jones, partnering with his neighbor farmers just makes sense. "It's a lot of work to maintain that commitment," he says—but it's worth it.