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Comfort ZONE

At Montana's The Resort at Paws Up, the rustic outdoors meet the finest luxury offerings. Oh, and if you go at the right time, there's also transcendent barbecue.

By David Zivan

It comes up on me suddenly, a bit of a surprise, but I think I am going to cry. Good news is, the cause of this sensation is some sort of primitive joy, a happiness that has originated in my mouth, rushed down my spine, then leapt back up again, lodging somewhere in my lower brainstem. *Behold*, the electricity in my body says to me. *You stand atop the food chain, and it is very, very good.*

What it is, is the brisket—just one bite's worth, tender as an underdone cheesecake, layered thick with black pepper, full of fat and smoke.

It doesn't hurt that I'm sitting at the edge of an enormous meadow, encircled by the Garnet mountains of Western Montana, in what is essentially the backyard of The Resort at Paws Up (pawsup.com), a luxury resort 30 miles outside Missoula. I'm here for Montana Master Grillers, a long weekend of food and drink and mountain adventures—activities both in and out of my city-slicker comfort zone. Big-time chefs (whom the resort deems members of the Hall of Flame) have converged from across the country to do demos and share secrets.

The man who has nearly reduced me to tears is Wayne Mueller, Texas barbecue royalty and current proprietor of Louie Mueller Barbecue in Taylor, Texas, named after his late grandfather. Louie Mueller's is one of those places that's always at or near the top of the lists, a legendary joint. As I chew, I make a note

to get there as soon as I possibly can.

Wayne is a modest and congenial fellow, as geniuses so often are, and he gamely takes questions from the small group that has gathered.

The rub, he tells us, which makes what is known in Texas as the bark, is nine parts black pepper, one part salt. Without fail, he uses briskets graded prime, which makes all the difference, he

says. Yes, he misses his daddy, every day. No, the pepper is not sourced in any special way—it's the grind that matters, 16 mesh; anyone can do it for you; it's only slightly larger than you probably grind at home. No sugar, no paprika, no cumin.

I step forward to the enormous carving board for a refill, sneaking a glance at the unsliced hunk. It doesn't look special. It just tastes amazing.



«It's not hard to make wine, really. It's been the same recipe for 8,000 years. The hard part is making it consistently good.»

—DENNIS CAKEBREAD,
CHAIRMAN AND SENIOR
VICE PRESIDENT SALES
AND MARKETING,
CAKEBREAD CELLARS »



Clockwise from top: The Resort at Paws Up maintains its own herds of cattle and bison; a typical view from the property; Wayne Mueller, scion of the Louie Mueller barbecue temple in Taylor, Texas. Opposite page: From left: Horseback experiences of many levels are available with expert guides; Lisa and Dennis Cakebread from the storied California winery.



And this is what the guy achieves when he's not on his home turf. I decide I don't believe him about the rub.

The questions become more technical, about temperatures in the smoker and the impact of wind and humidity. These are all things he and a small group of trusted pit masters consider, but clearly the mastery depends on feel.

"I don't get zany false positives with touch," he says, holding his rubber-gloved hands up in front of him. "The meat doesn't lie. These don't lie."

It's not all eating at The Resort at Paws Up. There's drinking too. And shotguns. Whitewater. An on-site herd of bison. I had an excellent massage in a tent with a view of the mountains on one side and a tiny brook babbling behind me. I can't get it all in here. Plus, the people are amazing.

Take, for instance, Natasha, riding out there in front of me, guiding my morning trail ride. With her twin red ponytails and her rail-thin build, she looks like the spunky cowgirl from *Toy Story*. More beautiful, by far, and tougher, and it is hard to imagine her ever aimlessly trailing a clueless cowboy, but the resemblance cannot go unnoticed. She's fresh out of The University of Montana Western, where she has earned a degree in equestrian science. We exchange pleasantries. I don't usually ride horses, I say. I'm from Atlanta, but I live in the city of Chicago. The actual city.

"I have roots in Chicago," she says, improbably. "My grandfather did the lighting design for the Sears Tower. Or whatever they call it now."

"That's what they call it," I say. On either side of us, tall scrub pines reach into the impossibly wide blue sky, dotted with clouds that look painted there. There's not much brush alongside the trails, just purple flowers poking up in patches the size of large swimming pools.

"What's your last name?" I ask.

"Mikita," she says.

"Um..." I say.

"Yes, I'm related," she answers—referring, of course, to Stan Mikita, a

CONTINUED...

...CONTINUED Chicago Blackhawks, and one of the greatest hockey players—ever. A goal-scoring machine who dominated the game in the 1960s. An immortal.

Roots indeed. What you are, Natasha, is a member of the Chicago nobility. And though that makes me sit up straighter in the saddle, I try not to consider the coincidence too deeply. The horse keeps moving, and I have to maintain my balance.

Another of the expert guests in for the weekend is Dennis Cakebread, one of the brothers who runs Cakebread Cellars, started by their parents in 1973. Cakebread wines are notoriously delicious, favorites on steakhouse lists, and he is a big draw for the event.

I'm at ease in the wine world, but my introduction to Cakebread is to join him for a round of sporting clays, an activity with which I am familiar, but by no means expert. It's very clear early on that Cakebread, to borrow a phrase, is handy with a scattergun,



From top: Before leading a tasting, Dennis Cakebread dusts some clay pigeons; tomahawk rib-eyes being prepared for a picnic by the Blackfoot River; at a demonstration event, Texan Wayne Mueller considers a whole brisket—covered, he claims, in nothing but salt and pepper.



On my last night at The Resort at Paws Up, all the chefs are set up under tents behind the property's restaurants. There's mechanical bull riding and axe throwing. Sliders made of pig face. Instead of brisket, Mueller is piling sliced steak, allegedly prepared in the same manner, onto croissants. I have three of them, chewing thoughtfully so as to determine how it's done.

When the subject last came up, it was in a public forum. I slide over and try a slyer approach. "C'mon, man," I say. "This is, like, you know, just for personal use. I won't tell anyone. Seriously. What do you do?"

"Nine parts pepper, one part salt," he says.

This may be a mystery I have to live with a little longer, I decide, as the sun finally begins to fade and a bluegrass band starts up. I retreat back to the Glacier Distilling Company table, where they are happy to tell me about everything that goes into their glorious product. At near dark, as the band finishes its set, fireworks swoop above the vast meadow, against the big sky. I make a mental note to get back as soon as I possibly can. ■

dusting pair after pair of zippy orange discs. I sidle up near him.

"You know," I say. "I'm really just here for the tasting."

"You'll have to bear me to get to that," he says.

I do not. But when we finish, he seems to have no objection to my joining the little party. Charcuterie, bread and cheese are piled high, and first open is a 2014 vintage chardonnay, perhaps the winery's flagship varietal. It's a Californian, for sure, but with a real Burgundian balance and elegance. I make another note—to get to Cakebread Cellars as soon as I possibly can. Cakebread circles the table, pouring.

"It's not hard to make wine, really," he says. "It's been the same recipe for 8,000 years. The hard part is making it consistently good."

