



# NORTHERN exposure

Alaskan spot prawn  
crudo, \$12, Beau  
Schooler, The Rookery  
Café, Juneau, Alaska.  
RECIPE, p. 94.

Alaskan chefs revel in their remote terroir

## by Kate Parham Kordsmeier

Once upon a time, Alaskan cuisine meant salmon, moose and potatoes. But today, chefs in this somewhat remote state are creating dishes far more exciting than canned fish. The cuisine is still anchored by fresh ingredients found in their wild, natural environments, but now, chefs like Marian Beck of The Saltry in Halibut Cove are introducing flavors and techniques that match the exotic feel of the state's *terroir*.

"We needed food that was art," admits Beck, a native Alaskan who studied meat production at California Polytechnic State University. In fact, her studies, and her travels around the globe, were Beck's impetus for returning to Alaska, bringing with her "good food from good growing environments."

Beck opened The Saltry, a converted

houseboat accessible only by ferry, back in 1984. Since the beginning, she's served predominantly seafood. But not just any seafood: "Everything must be freshly harvested from Alaskan waters (no farmed fish) and purchased when it's at its peak quality," says Beck, who also sources produce, like greens and root vegetables, from her on-site garden, and bakes all her own whole-grain bread in-house.

Her opening menu featured a combo platter of Scandinavian-style pickled fish, smoked salmon *pâté*, nori rolls and ceviche. She has since expanded her repertoire with black cod bathed in *dashi*, a reflection of the growing Asian and Hawaiian communities in southeast Alaska (\$22, recipe, p. 83). "We sear the black cod skin-side down so the skin is crispy and delicious. We prepare all our fish with eating the skin in mind," she says.

Beck is not alone in her quest to make her restaurant "as of the earth." At Ketchikan's Waterfall Resort and Steamboat Bay Fishing Club, Meagan Kilgore relies on ingredients that can be caught, foraged or grown in southeast Alaska.

Her philosophy: keep it simple and let the ingredients speak for themselves. "Everything is so fresh, it would be a disservice to cover those flavors by overcooking or over-powering," says Kilgore.

While it's true that Alaskan cuisine has become more refined in recent years, the state's core ingredients remain at the heart of the food. Seafood reigns supreme—salmon, halibut, cod, king and Dungeness crab, octopus, oysters, prawns and sometimes clams—but wild berries and mushrooms round out Alaskan cookery, as do the moose, deer, caribou, mountain goats and bears hunted by many Alaskans.

## Q&A: EVOLVING ALASKA



Beau Schooler of Juneau's The Rookery Café is helping put Alaskan cuisine on the map with his recent nod as a semifinalist for the James Beard Foundation's "Rising Star Chef of the Year." We sat down with him to learn more about modern Alaskan cooking.

**Not many chefs in Alaska have received this kind of attention. What gives?**

There has been a culinary shift in the last few years in Alaska with people's tastes changing. What used to be a strictly "meat and potatoes"-type culture has made way for Neapolitan-style pizzas featuring smoked salmon, curries with fish heads and a growing appetite for crudo preparations of seafood.

**Has this shift affected your cooking style?**

My style has always been influenced by outside cuisine. I trained in Italy, where I picked up the philosophy that a few stellar components to a dish is all you need. So a lot of my dishes tend to be three or four core ingredients, and that's it.

**So what makes your food stand out?**

My approach is about taking the core Alaskan ingredients and incorporating them into other cuisines and global dishes to bring a fresh taste. I have a daughter who is Filipino on her mother's side, so I have drawn a lot of influence from eating with her family. My coconut-poached scallops with squid ink *adobo* is a Filipino-influenced dish. The scallops are poached in a mix of coconut milk, lime juice and fish sauce, and then plated with a squid ink *adobo* made from rice vinegar, soy sauce, ginger, onion, chiles and squid ink.

It pays to find new ways to prepare the same ingredients, Kilgore says. Her food is as Alaska-driven as her cedar-planked salmon (recipe, [plateonline.com](#)), which she calls "a great representation of cooking with native wood, while also using locally accessible ingredients." Kilgore is also influenced by global techniques.

Take her *cioppino*. While it may be inspired by soups from Italy, it's been adapted to reflect the abundant Alaskan waters—Kilgore uses Dungeness crab legs, halibut and king salmon (recipe, [plateonline.com](#)). "It's always a crowd favorite," says Kilgore. So is her seafood mac and cheese. "It's made with Alaska spot prawns, scallops and Dungeness crab with green peas and a lobster Mornay sauce, and we finish the dish with lemon-herb breadcrumbs for extra texture."

### SAVVY SOURCING

Though Alaska offers chefs loads of fresh seafood, "the most challenging thing about cooking in Alaska is food accessibility," admits Kilgore. "Most people are used to being able to hop in a car and run to the store if we need something, but Waterfall Resort is located on 52 acres of Alaskan wilderness only accessible by sea plane and boat, so sourcing ingredients requires advance planning, frontier ingenuity and killer organizational skills."

Beau Schooler, chef/co-owner of The Rookery Café in Juneau, can relate. He sources most of his products from Seattle and Portland and places all orders at least a week in advance since everything must come up on a barge, meaning next-day delivery is never an option. "If I need anything in a hurry, I have to pay for it to

be flown up, increasing the already high prices I'm paying," explains Schooler, who keeps tabs on his usage reports.

Though waste is also an issue, Schooler says his largest expense is shipping. "All my ingredients cost \$1 to \$1.75 more per pound than anywhere down south." Fortunately, because his seafood costs are so much cheaper, it often evens out.

So while the food cost might be higher than expected for something simple like his reindeer tallow biscuits (\$3, recipe, [plateonline.com](#)), it's less than you think for spot prawn crudo (\$12, recipe, p. 94).

Likewise, Beck is also dependent on price adjustments, and must plan months ahead for The Saltry. "I buy 3,000 pounds of cod in the winter, and 40-pound octopuses, a by-catch, and everything is flash-frozen and vacuum-packed, ensuring everything we serve from May

through September is fresh and seasonal," says Beck.

With no commercial market nearby, Beck stocks up on staples like flour, rice and seaweed, but spends most of her days running around town picking up fresh seafood. "All day, I have vendors call me and say 'I have three beautiful halibut,' and I'll run over and get them," says Beck. "It's hard and you don't get paid, but that's why it's important to know the fishermen, gardeners and growers, and to understand the fish and the landscape."

Despite the learning curve, all three chefs unanimously agree: there's nothing quite like being in the wilderness and cooking up new ways to showcase the beautiful bounty of Alaska.

Kate Parham Kordsmeier is long overdue for a foodie visit to the Pacific Northwest.



### Black cod

Owner Marian Beck, *The Saltry, Halibut Cove, Alaska*

Yield: 72 servings

Menu price: \$22; food cost/serving: 50%

Glass noodles, 2-Lb bag 1 each

Sesame oil as needed

Black cod, skin on, portioned into 6-Oz pieces 36 Lb

Butter, diced 5 TBS

Garlic cloves, crushed 4 each

Thyme sprigs 3 each

*Dashi* ▼ 5 gal

1. Heat a pot of water over medium heat, bring to a simmer and throw in glass noodles. Let them sit for about 5 minutes, then drain. Rinse under cold running water and transfer to a bowl. Add sesame oil to noodles so they don't clump, and refrigerate until needed.

2. In a hot sauté pan over high heat, place cod skin-side down for about 1 minute, then turn heat down to medium and let skin crisp up. Cook about 90% skin-side down, then add butter, garlic and thyme to pan. As butter browns, baste fish.

3. To serve, place 3 ounces noodles in a bowl and pour 8 ounces warm *dashi* over noodles. Add a piece of seared fish, presenting it skin-side up so it doesn't get soggy.

### DASHI

Yield: 2 gal

Shallots, sliced 4 each

Garlic cloves, crushed 10 each

Onion, roughly chopped 1 each

Shiitake mushroom stems 1 C

Ginger, fresh, peeled, chopped 4 Oz

Lemongrass stalks, bruised 2 each

Bay leaves, toasted 2 each

Coriander seed, toasted 3 TBS

Fennel seed, toasted 3 TBS

Black peppercorns, toasted 3 TBS

Dried *kombu*, sheets of 5 each

Bonito flakes 1 C

Dried shiitake mushrooms 1 Lb

Vegetable stock 2 gal

Soy sauce 8 Oz

In a *rondeau* over medium heat, place shallots, garlic, onion, mushroom stems, ginger and lemongrass. Slow roast in pan to get color. In a sachet, combine bay leaves, coriander, fennel, peppercorns, *kombu* and bonito flakes. Tie it up. In another sachet, place dried mushrooms and tie it up. Add vegetable stock and sachets to *rondeau* and simmer for about 30 minutes. To finish *dashi*, add soy sauce and strain. Reserve until needed.