

FOOD



SEASONAL SENSATION

Open from May to October, the Laughing Horse Lodge is known far and wide for its fine cuisine and quality accommodations

STORY BY SYDNE GEORGE
PHOTOS BY JESSICA LOWRY



Tucked alongside Highway 83 near the southern end of Swan Lake, the Laughing Horse Lodge has been serving up fresh, fabulous food in a charming atmosphere since 2000.

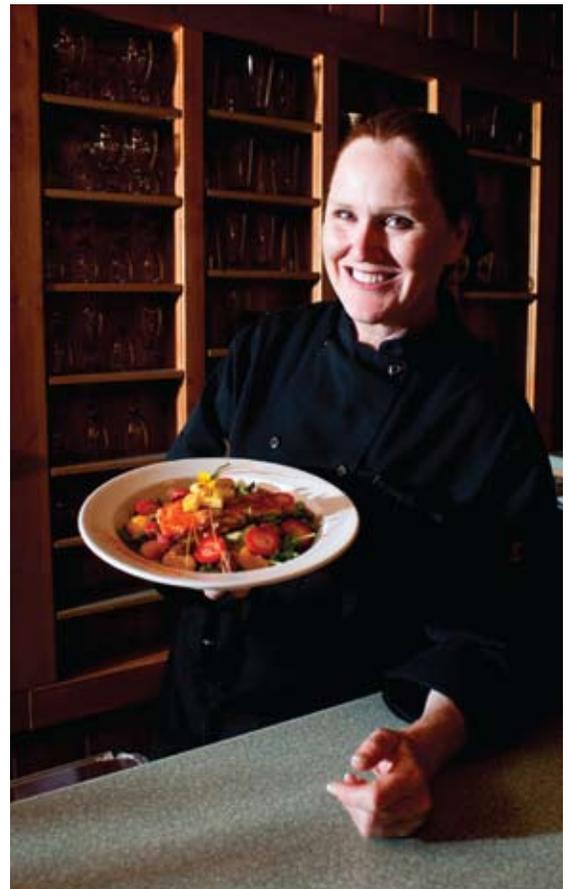
“You could drive right by, in this little bitty town, and not know it’s the nicest place around,” loyal diner Don Loranger says. And he’s right. It would be easy to miss the red-roofed log building adorned with blooming baskets of flowers if you weren’t looking for it.

But if you happened to drive by without stopping, you’d be missing out. “It’s the most amazing place I’ve ever been,” says John Ritter, of Satellite Beach, Florida, reminiscing about his first visit to the lodge. “The website invited me in, and I ended up staying,” he says. “I had an unbelievable experience.”

Ritter recalls with fondness when chef-owner Kathleen Moon welcomed him into her tiny kitchen to make him an artichoke and blue cheese omelet. He returned later for a dinner that was extraordinary, he says. “I would swing several hundred miles out of the way to eat there,” Ritter says.

“Her food is fantastic,” says Shirley Wilson, who has a cabin on Swan Lake. “Kathleen grows her own herbs and is a gourmet cook. I love her salads.” ▶

This page, top: The Laughing Horse Lodge is located in Swan Lake on Highway 83. Bottom: Kathleen Moon is the chef and owner of the the Laughing Horse Lodge. Facing page: One of Moon’s specialties, ahi tuna, is marinated in ginger-soy and mango salsa and served on a bed of wehani rice with asian veggies and fresh wasabi.





This page: Joanne Davenport, left, enjoys dessert with Kaye McCreedy and Tara Lynch. Facing page: One of the restaurant's signature desserts is a freshly baked chocolate chunk cookie served with vanilla ice cream. This dessert is brought directly from the oven to the table in a cast-iron skillet.

Wilson and her family find the homey atmosphere of the Laughing Horse Lodge appealing. They like walking in and seeing a lot of people they know. "Kathleen always comes by and chats and adds to the enjoyment, and we appreciate that," Wilson says.

Describing Moon as bright and well-educated, Loranger says in addition to making fantastic hamburgers, a trip to the Laughing Horse often includes a great conversation. Moon, he says, is always ready to discuss a wide variety of subjects as she makes dishes like pasta vongole, buffalo ribeye with huckleberry coulis or a mouth-watering prime rib. "Anything she does is just

excellent," Loranger says.

"My ahi tuna dishes have put me on the map," and having what Moon calls, "the best burger in the universe doesn't hurt either," she says. "A local told me when I opened that folks wouldn't buy a \$9 burger or that pink piece of fish. My response was, 'Folks would buy a \$9 burger if it was worth \$9.'" And that pink piece of fish, or ahi tuna, now outsells her natural Angus sirloins five to one. Moon adds that her cast-iron skillet cookies and huckleberry peach pie also keep her customers coming back.

Moon credits her ingredients as a major factor in her success. "My tag line is, 'Mostly Organic, Always Fresh, Totally Delicious,' and my vendors are critically important to maintaining the reality of those words." Patrick Kissane, her representative at Food Services of America, has been a key player. Moon says he quickly responds to sometimes strange requests and has ensured the quality she demands. She also uses food from local businesses like Loon Lake Farms, Perfect Cuts, Ceres Bakery, Rocky Mountain Wine and the Missoula Farmers Market.

Moon has begun to pass her experience and expertise in the kitchen to younger chefs. "It has only been in the last two years that I have relinquished total control of the kitchen by bringing in young cooking talent, but I am still annoyingly present to ensure that what I created is consistently delivered," Moon says.

She is constantly creating new events and opportunities for guests. For example, when a dish comes out of the kitchen and is delivered to the table, "I want a 'Wow!' for presentation, service and aroma," Moon says. "My front staff knows that if they don't get a 'Wow!' we have failed, and they let us know immediately so we can adjust what we are doing."

The attention the Laughing Horse staff gives to customers is critical to its success. Open from May to October, Moon says they have a big challenge to overcome in a short time: learn their guests' names, find out what they like to drink and eat, know where they like to sit and what pace they like for their evening. "Being proactive makes each guest feel like the only guest in my home for the evening. That kind of customization is important to creating an evening that is more of a special event than just going out to eat," she says.

According to Moon, most local kids don't want to work in Swan Lake. They want the bright

lights of Bigfork, so she brings in international college kids to work at the lodge. "It is a challenge, culturally and with language, but that keeps me on my toes as well and satisfies my need to teach and share this incredible place," she says.

If you stop between November and April, you will find the lodge

closed for a long winter's rest. Moon packs her bags and embarks on a different adventure every year with four rules: no Wal-marts, no snow shovels, warm water and someplace she hasn't been before. She often ends up working somewhere in a kitchen, but her main goal for each winter is to re-energize and re-envision the lodge. "It is very important to look at my business with fresh eyes



each year," Moon says.

Twelve years in business have created a loyal following of diners who have their favorite menu items. Moon continues to honor those, but also introduces new dishes each season based on her travels. Her private chef tastings, wine dinners and

catering assignments are opportunities for her to present new, unique and creative dishes. Barbara Nelson and her husband, Jim Bradshaw, who spend summers in Bigfork, agree. They especially enjoy dinners that feature food and wine from different countries.

"They're just wonderful," Nelson says, "We always try to go to those." **M**

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