

The best dinner in Colorado just might be on a ranch in the middle of nowhere

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I didn't cry at my wedding. I didn't cry when either of my children were born. But I cried at a dinner in De Beque, because it was just that good.

You might ask, rightly so, where the heck is De Beque? It's a teeny town in Mesa County, some 21 miles outside of Palisade. But the real question is why the best dinner in Colorado is on a ranch in a town of fewer than 500 people, a 3 1/2 hour drive from Denver.

First, the back story: In late January, I got a Facebook message from Patrick Ayres, inviting me to a 24-course dinner that he and his friend, Matt Chasseur, were putting on at The High Lonesome Ranch in De Beque.

Certainly, the number of courses piqued my interest. What convinced me was the fact that Ayres had been the executive sous chef at Canlis (one of Seattle's most exclusive restaurants), and that Chasseur, now executive chef at High Lonesome, had been chef de cuisine at one of the country's best molecular gastronomy restaurants, the triple-Michelin-starred Alinea in Chicago.

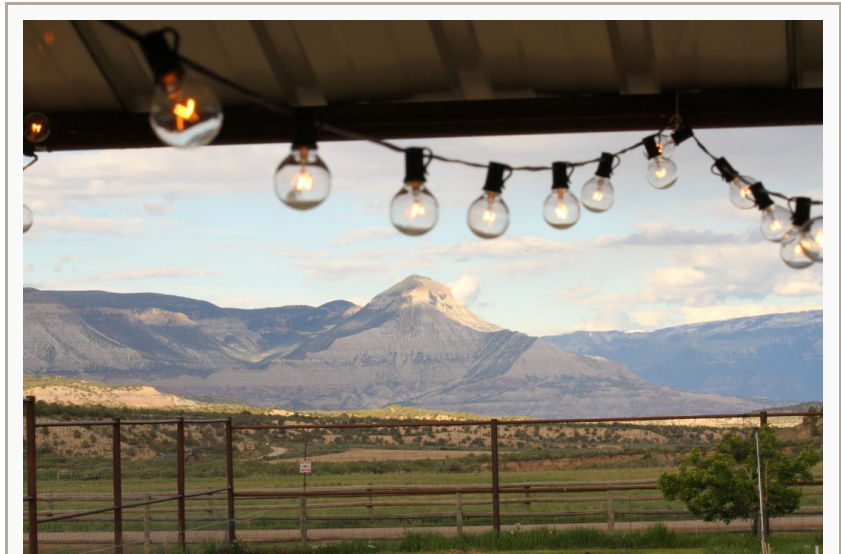
I didn't know what to expect. I thought I was going for background on Ayres' new restaurant (Cloverdale, opening in Steamboat Springs on July 1), and that I'd essentially be getting a preview of whatever he'd have on the menu there. Sure, it was a long way to drive for a restaurant preview, but getting away for the night with my husband seemed like a fun idea.

One of the many benefits of this privileged job is getting to eat the best food in the Denver metro area – whether that's a \$2 taco or a \$45 rack of lamb. I was excited for my High Lonesome Ranch dinner, but surely it couldn't rival what the best chefs in Denver are doing right now. No matter their pedigree, Ayres and Chasseur are now working in a town so small that I didn't have wireless service. Dinner might be good, but it couldn't be *that* good, I thought.

Oh, that city girl arrogance.

By course two — a barely-filled glass of chilled coconut curry, spot prawn ceviche, mango and coriander served with a fried, head-on spot prawn and a lemongrass “whisk” with which to swirl it all together — I was flabbergasted. This may have been the best few bites of food I'd ever eaten.

And remember, I was at a ranch in De Beque.



A view from High Lonesome Ranch in De Beque, Colorado. (Provided by Kelsey Richards and Marian Cole)











A glass topper contains just-caught juniper and sagebrush-smoked trout (Provided by Kelsey Richards)

Course after amazing course followed. There was the shoyu-marinated hamachi and diced dragon fruit finished tableside with a cucumber and sake “slush”; a fried soft shell crab molded into a swan and decorated in XO sauce, pickled ginger and candied kumquat; a savory egg filled with celery root custard and wheat-rye hybrid granola that, as one of my fellow diners pointed out, tasted like Thanksgiving; a juniper- and sagebrush-smoked brook trout that had been caught *on property* earlier that day; a lobster, Osetra caviar (read: expensive) and melted butter “pudding” that was so decadent and indulgent it made me happier than stepping on crunchy things (and stepping on crunchy things makes me absurdly happy); and a fork-tender chunk of A5 Japanese Wagyu (a.k.a. the world’s best beef) served on a fresh-from-the-fire stone, a dish that had everyone’s eyes rolling back into their heads. Oh, and 20 or so other courses, including an assortment of desserts arriving at the table via helium balloons.

Now, I’m not one for ultra-fancy, fussy food, and when you see the photographs from the High Lonesome meal or read these descriptions, that’s what you might think this was. Yes, this dinner is certainly an example of food as art, but the reason it was so remarkable is because it did more than just look beautiful. It tasted better than anything I’d had in ages, maybe ever. The aesthetics, the aromas, the flavors — it all came together to create the most striking dinner experience I’ve ever had.

So there I was, in awe of the food I’d so eagerly consumed, still dumbstruck that this happened *on a ranch in teeny-tiny De Beque*.

I asked Ayres and Chasseur how, after such glitzy, big-city careers, they ended up at the very-rural High Lonesome

Ranch. Ayres explained that he had been executive chef at the ranch from early 2013 until December 2014, when he left to start working on his Cloverdale farm and restaurant in Steamboat (where he and his wife, Kaylee, went to high school); Chasseur succeeded him in 2015. These guys are both young — Ayres is 30 and Chasseur 33 — and their answers were similar: Essentially it came down to quality of life and where they wanted to start their young families. (Ayres has two daughters ages 1 and 4; Chasseur has a 1- and a 3-year old.)

“Paisley was born in October of 2012 and we pretty much immediately decided it would be a good idea to move on from Canlis to do my own thing and, if possible, do it in Colorado near our family,” Ayres said. “After doing a few tastings around the country, the one that made the most sense for where I wanted to go in my career was High Lonesome Ranch. To have the opportunity to grow our vegetables and raise our own animals was hard to pass up, as isolated as it is.”

When Ayres decided to open his own restaurant in Steamboat Springs, thereby vacating his head chef job at the ranch, Chasseur and his wife, Ashley Fees (who had been a host at Alinea and assistant general manager at Alinea’s sister restaurant, Next) just happened to be looking for a slower pace of life as well.

“Originally, we moved back to the East Coast to start our family,” Chasseur says of his post-Alinea life. “One day on a random search, Ashley found the opening for the ranch executive chef position and we emailed in my resume. Patrick was in contact within 24 hours. When I came out to do my tasting, I was completely blown away by the integrity of the team that was in place, along with the resources that were available.”

Because the food world doesn’t (yet) enjoy the same level of celebrity as, say, sports, let me put this in other terms: Chasseur moving to a ranch in De Beque to cook is like an emerging NBA star with a spot on the Cavs trading it in for a high school basketball coaching gig in Lamar. It’s just a different lifestyle and set of values.



Chefs Matt Chasseur and Patrick Ayres (Allyson Reedy, The Know)

There were a dozen people at the ranch dinner. With the exception of a Michigan-based land conservation guy, everyone was from Grand Junction. No one in Denver — where one-upping each other with unique dining experiences has become an almost city-wide hobby — seems to know about this place. To get people to come, the ranch actually has to cold-call people.

Let me repeat that: *They are cold-calling to get people to eat what I believe is the best, most imaginative dinner in Colorado.*

Now the bad news: This dinner doesn’t come cheap. What I attended was a collaboration dinner between Ayres and Chasseur (they hope to do one annually), but Chasseur will, ideally, be putting on 20- to 25-course dinners monthly at the ranch for \$475 per person (which includes drinks, a room for the night and brunch the next morning; that cost excludes tax and gratuity). Ayres will have a 10- to 14-course tasting menu at Cloverdale for \$135.

It’s a lot of money, I know. But a meal that sticks with you for a lifetime and transcends what you thought food could be? That brings tears to my eyes.

The High Lonesome Ranch's next tasting dinner is July 22: 0275 County Road 222, De Beque, 970-208-9308; thehighlonesomeranch.com. Cloverdale (opening July 1): 207 9th St., Steamboat Springs; cloverdalerestaurant.com.