

MARK SHAFFER finds a taste of Big Sky Country... in the Lowcountry.



"Simple food done well is a beautiful thing."

- Adam Markowitz, Montana's Executive Chef

Prologue

I love Montana. [Big Sky Country](#) , [Yellowstone](#) and [Glacier National Parks](#) , wild rivers, snow capped mountains and nothing at all to do with squealing pre-teen girls and the sinister marketing machine of the Disney Corporation (cough, Hannah Montana, cough). To a native easterner the sheer volume of open space can be daunting. On sunny spring days the horizon seems endless until the Rockies rise up out of the west like the teeth of the Earth itself, the sky impossibly vast and blue, the valleys greener than green has any business being and always [a river runs through it](#)

The citizens of Montana appear bound by state law to own at least two horses apiece, a four-wheel drive pickup truck with at least one firearm, a fishing rod displayed on the required rear window gun wrack, silver belt buckles that can double as hubcaps and hats under which you could hang a hammock. Someone once told me that Montana wasn't as much a place as it was a state of mind. [Norman Mclean](#) might agree with that. After all, there are very few places where you can experience all four seasons in a single afternoon - in July.

I love Montana.

So how would a place called Montana's Restaurant and Grizzly Bar play beneath the mossy oaks of Bluffton within spittin' distance of the Atlantic, with nary a cowpoke in sight, two thousand miles from where the buffalo roam? Well, first of all, they had me at "Grizzly Bar," but for this posse of Moveable Feasters the tale unfolds on the table. I'll meet you at the bar after.



The Lowdown

Location: 16 Kitty's Landing Road, Bluffton.

Atmosphere: Intimate, yet casual. The name says it all.

Cuisine: Continental American with a Fusion Flare.

Alcohol: Full bar, good wine list, house specials

Hours: Open 11:00 am Monday – Saturday. Open Sundays for brunch at 9:30 am.

Reservations: Phone (843) 815-BEAR or fax (843) 815-2326.

Etcetera: Book the Buffalo Room for a meeting or private dining experience. Saturday night is

Bison Night featuring Chef's fresh buffalo special. Catering is also available.

Website: www.montanasonline.com

The matched set of carved bear totems standing guard by the door says this is not your typical Lowcountry restaurant. Then again, rocking chairs on the front porch, a side porch screened-in against the indigenous buzzing/biting pests and an outdoor cooker the size of a locomotive tell me there's more to the story. The interior décor recalls an old-fashioned sepia photograph come to life in warm, soothing earth tones from floor to ceiling. Waterfall windows – panes with sheeting water running within – are set into the wall separating the bar from the dining room. Behind some of these windows are large colorful flower arrangements set in huge vases lit like oil paintings. Indeed, framed behind the flowing water this creates the illusion of a living impressionist painting – a surreal [Cezanne](#) – beautiful and also practical according to Assistant Manager, Bryan Hansen. “It acts as a barrier to keep sound from bouncing into the dining room,” he says. “It fits the theme of the restaurant perfectly, a brilliant idea.”



Stepping into the bar is like stepping into a western hunting lodge complete with mounted trophies and hides – just enough to foster the ambience without being creepy. An entire wall up to the top of the vaulted ceiling is painted in a massive mural depicting the wilds of the restaurant's namesake. White water rushes through a valley of golden aspens beneath snow capped peaks. The only thing missing is Brad Pitt and a fly rod – and I mean sitting at the bar sipping a cold one.



All these elements make for a strange juxtaposition, an odd marriage of rowdy western rustica and citified elegance. Like [John Wayne and Maureen O'Hara in McClintock!](#), somehow it just works and works beautifully.

The Moveable Feast convenes in front of the fireplace in the dining room.

Starters

Crab Cakes, Steamed Local Shrimp and Lowcountry Chowder.



On Tape: The Crab Cakes

Feaster 1: There's a lot of crab in there.

Feaster 2: That's the consensus. And the sauce, fantastic. What is it?

Feaster 3: It's a remoulade. Spicy, but it doesn't overpower the crab.

Feaster 2: You know... I'm enjoying these crab cakes, looking at the fireplace and thinking, what a perfect winter restaurant.

Feaster 3: Right. The colors, the wood – it's just so warm and cozy. Love it.

There are times when it's good to be crabby. This is one of those times. The jumbo lump crab

cakes are thick and seared a nice light golden brown, but most importantly there is almost no filler. The Feasters are right; there is a lot of crab in there, and this is not always the case with crab cakes. Crab is expensive. They're ornery little critters with claws and shells and a nasty disposition. They take a lot of time and effort to catch and more time and effort to process. Crab cakes are among my favorite things on the planet and I've had them up one coast and down the other in fancy restaurants and seaside shacks and they are always a crapshoot – you never know what you're going to get unless you roll the dice. Too often I've been served crab cakes with more filler than the federal budget. Not so today. These are practically perfect and a fine foreshadowing of what Chef Adam has in store for us.

The shrimp are next and always a litmus test for a Lowcountry eatery.

"This is our local shrimp, this actually comes right out of our waters – right out there," Chef Adam motions in the general direction of the Atlantic. "We like to support our local shrimpers so we try and get the finest local seafood we can." They are beauties. Presented in a crustacean chorus line dancing pink as flamingoes around a white rectangular platter -simple, effective and delicious. The house-made cocktail sauce has a great horseradish kick to it, but the shrimp speak for themselves, sweet, firm, succulent and so very fresh. In fact, they'll be fresh at Montana's even after the season is over. "When I know the season's coming to an end," he explains, "they actually freeze them for me right on the boat. The water circulates around the shrimp and 'block freezes' them. Just as good as fresh." He stockpiles enough to make sure Montana's never runs out of local shrimp even in between seasons. "We're not traditionally known here as a seafood restaurant," he adds, "but we want people to know that we have fresh, local seafood if they choose to order it."



That commitment to local producers stretches back to the Chef's childhood growing up around the lush hills near York, Pennsylvania where Amish farmers still drive their goods to market by horse and buggy. Markowitz spent years honing his skills in kitchens all over the country before a six year run as Executive Chef at The Wine Cellar in Jacksonville, Florida. Eventually he took over as Executive Chef for Hilton Head's legendary Hudson's Seafood, a Lowcountry tradition for decades. "During the summertime we were turning out anywhere between five and eight hundred meals a night," he recalls, shaking his head. "It was unbelievable." As the name would imply, the pace at Montana's is a bit less hectic affording Markowitz and his staff to pay more attention to detail, flavor and presentation. "People want simple foods they feel comfortable with and they want it done well," he says. His passion for food is unmistakable as he explains his approach to Montana's. "Let's say out of all these dishes you prefer the lamb. So when you're in the mood for lamb, you know that we do lamb the way you like it and you're going to come to Montana's to get it," he smiles. "If we can get one person to come here for one item – whatever it is – and that's what we're known for, then we've done our job."

On Tape: Lowcountry Chowder

Feaster 1: You've got to try this soup.

Feaster 2: What is it?

Feaster 1: Lowcountry chowder. It's full of corn, sausage, shrimp.

Feaster 4: That is so rich. Just perfect for a cold winter's day.

Feaster 3: That's stellar. That's a meal in itself.

The Meat of the Matter

Bleu Cheese Burger, Lamb Chops, Filet of Beef



On Tape: The Bacon Bleu Cheddar Burger

Feaster 1: Now that is a phenomenal burger.

Feaster 3: Got a great charbroil flavor to it.

Feaster 4: It's not over-cooked - medium - still nice and juicy, and this decadent pile of bleu cheese, man.

Feaster 3: The bacon makes it. It's almost too much, but then is there really a thing as too much bacon? I feel like a great white going in for the kill.

'Nuff said. Burgers are a fine measure of a restaurant's commitment to quality. In this fast food nation the ubiquitous burger is an easy thing to pass off smothered in abject mediocrity and "special sauce." Most people will never notice. This burger begs to be noticed. Along with a haystack of fresh cut sweet potato fries, this is the perfect choice at the Grizzly Bar along with a beer and a ballgame.

On Tape: Lamb Chops

Feaster 3: I just want to pick 'em up and eat 'em like drumsticks.

Feaster 2: I don't often eat lamb. It's not that I don't like it. It's just that I never think to order it. This is outstanding.

Feaster 4: And the grit cakes go so well.

Feaster 3: And you know, contrary to popular belief, it's not hard to screw up a grit.

Feaster 5: Is it possible to have a grit?

Feaster 1: The lamb in a word: succulent.

Feaster 3: It's almost too good to talk about.



Like scallops and crab cakes, lamb can be so Tom Cruise – Risky Business. But once again Chef Adam's turned a dicey decision into a sure thing. The chops come on the bone with a mint apple glaze – sweet, savory and aromatic all at once, all in concert. They are plump, juicy and medium rare, but most importantly – meaty – the kind of lamb chop you'd expect from a place called Montana's. In fact, I'm betting that the average diner takes at least one chop home in a doggy bag the dog never sees. And while the chops are superb, the riff on a Lowcountry staple simply pulls the plate together. "We try to show some southern flare," says Chef. "We have our grit cakes where we've incorporated jalapeno and some other seasonings for something unique." He's also incorporated copious amounts of sweet cream and butter to his old-fashioned yellow grits, just as nature intended. This may be the best example of the Chef's philosophy: simple but well done. There is nothing simpler or more expected on a southern plate than grits, and often enough, nothing as boring. These crispy wedges of stone ground goodness pack a sharpness and heat from the chilies that not only adds an entirely new dimension to a Dixieland standard, but to the lamb, as well. The final notes come from baby asparagus so fresh and

green and – yep – succulent, that it completes a chorus evocative of Spring.

On Tape: Filet of Beef

Feaster 2: What are these potatoes? They're so good.

Chef Adam: Caramelized onion and red bliss potato mash.

Feaster 2: Bliss being the operative word.

Fester 5: These collards are unbelievable.

Feaster 3: Great choice with the steak. I never would have dreamed that up.

Feaster 1: I don't even think you need a knife for this gorgeous thing.

Chef Adam: It's prime Angus. Top of the line. All of our beef is certified prime, the best money can buy.



Ah beef. Like the man says, it's what's for dinner – at least as often as I can get it.

The filet inspires such immediate carnivorous enthusiasm that one of the feasters immediately falls upon it with knife and fork before it's been photographed, hell, practically before it's out of Chef's hand. "Oh my God," she gasps, "I'm so sorry. I wasn't thinking." For a true meat lover – a die-hard carnivore – the reaction is a common one when presented with such overwhelming sensory input. It's like that scene in Jurassic Park when they lower the steer into the raptor pen and all hell breaks loose.

The steak is a thing of beauty both on the plate and on the palate. "It has really beautiful marbling," explains Chef Adam, "and as it cooks up that marbling almost acts like butter as it melts into the steak. So for people who like red meat but don't care for the fat content, the filet is absolutely the way to go." As the final bite melts in my mouth, I'm pretty sure I could go now and go a happy man. Chef Adam's background in French cooking comes through in his love of sauces, in this case a sweet chile-infused bordelaise that adds a completely unique depth of flavor to the dish. "All the sauces that we're making here are French in their background, but then we're also taking products that you'd get from places like Asia and putting fusion twists on them." The collards have spent the entire day braising in stock along with some sweet onion and rendered bacon, ham and corned beef. They are a consensus "Best Ever" around the table.

The caramelized onion and potato mash are as one Feaster put it, "to die for." A lesser piece of beef would be undeserving of such savory accompaniment in much the same way that Yo-Yo Ma and Itzhak Perlman would be undeserving of me with a baton.

The Moveable Feast adjourns with the promise of unexplored territory ahead for Montana's. "My background is Culinary French," says Chef Adam, "but Fusion Cuisine is the up and coming thing where you take a little bit of each different region of the world, combine it into one plate. We're beginning to do that here."

The Grizzly Bar



[Sampled Outings, Segments, Somewhere in the middle of Montana, Scoop, and more](#)