

The Zing is the Thing

For some food entrepreneurs in Montana, the way to customers' hearts is through their stomachs, with lots of heat

BY ADAM BOEHLER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN ZUMPANO



BUMPING OVER GRAVEL ON MISSION CREEK Road into the Absaroka foothills felt like unzipping a new season. This past winter was real, and those high peaks beyond our windshield were still snow-packed with the proof. But this day was different. This day we rolled down our windows to the warm breeze and pushed up our sleeves. This fine day we were finally able to carve off a piece of the warm Montana sun, turn it over in our hands, and stuff it into our smiling mouths.

After just a few miles and one left turn we dropped into the creek bottom and parked next to our photographer friend who'd arrived just ahead of us. Our host called out from near the creek where he was clearing dead chokecherry branches. He was out of breath but smiling when he strode our way, relieved, it seemed, that we'd interrupted his labor.

It wasn't quite noon, but the day was already the warmest of the year. Naturally, we talked about it as he led my girlfriend and I, laden with the day's provisions, across the lawn into his charming home.

The idea for the day was simple: lunch with friends. The friends who would join us were seasoned eaters. Not "foodies" exactly, but folks with big appetites who appreciate quality ingredients and proper technique, and who never shy away from a healthy dose of capsaicin, that natural chemical in peppers and pepper spray, that makes your tongue, and a grizzly bear's nose, sizzle.

So in an almost ritualistic attempt to burn away winter we decided to dust, douse and smother every dish with some hand-made Montana heat. With a marinade and some chile rubs from Bozeman, a pepper blend from Kalispell and a stop in between for some Missoula hot sauce, we had six chances to turn up the heat.

That summer sun was getting closer, and we gathered on that warm day with friends and family to give ourselves an early bite of it.

Opposite page: Wild venison coated in Montana Mex Chili rub is sliced alongside chicken drumsticks marinated in Montana Mex Sweet and Spicy Habanero sauce.

At right, from top to bottom: The author's father, girlfriend and host sample bites of Gandy Dancer salmon, Montana Mex chile-rubbed venison and Arthur Wayne chicken sandwiches.



OUT ON THE PICNIC TABLE, under that warm sun, my girlfriend and I went to work skewering vegetables. The onions, bell peppers and mushrooms had marinated overnight in olive oil and black pepper, and we added some fresh pineapple for a pop of sweetness.

Our host assigned himself quality-control duties and sampled the raw vegetables while explaining his concerns about the coming runoff. The water had risen considerably over the previous week, which prompted him to begin his annual chore of filling sandbags. He pointed to the hundred or so he'd already filled, saying he'd need 10 times more if the snow melted too fast and he wanted to keep the creek out of his kitchen.

When our dozen skewers were loaded he fired up the grill, and as if on cue the rest of our group began arriving.

First came my brother with his 5-year-old daughter. Then my father with his three-legged terrier. Shortly thereafter came another friend, the editor of this magazine.

While everyone chatted and praised the sun, I poured

myself a glass of white wine and spiced our first-course vegetables with a thick coat of Jalapeño Seasoning Blend from the folks at Montana Mex in Bozeman.

Eduardo Garcia, who grew up in Bozeman, co-founded Montana Mex in 2010 and is the culinary brains of the operation. He's become fairly famous in recent years due to an incident in 2011 in which he found a dead grizzly bear. When he tried to remove a claw, he was electrocuted and nearly killed by the 2400-volt downed power line that had killed the bear and lay unseen beneath the carcass.

After losing his left hand, four ribs and several torso muscles, Garcia returned to his life as a chef and perfected his recipes for Montana Mex (*Charged*, the documentary film about his ordeal, is available for purchase on multiple platforms).

A bright blend of sea salt, jalapeño, garlic, cilantro and oregano, it complemented the vegetables nicely. The crowd agreed it was particularly good on the pineapple. But it's clear that the folks at Montana Mex are focused more on overall balance, which it certainly has, rather than heat.

Protecting the Environment While Providing Opportunity

We're using worldclass technology to
preserve our natural resources
while creating 240 great paying Montana jobs.

See for Yourself and Take our Tour
Friday, June 1st
Tuesday, July 3rd
Friday, August 3rd
Saturday, September 1st
Friday, October 5th
Thursday, November 1st
to reserve a tour spot
call 406-547-3466



<http://blackbuttecopper.com>



The jalapeno and chile seasoning blends from Montana Mex were used on the vegetables and venison chops.

My idea, though, was to increase the heat a little more with each course. So while they crunched on the last of the vegetables, I readied the next two dishes, both of which were also given a Montana Mex treatment.

The chicken legs had marinated overnight in the Sweet & Spicy Habañero Sauce, the emphasis being on sweet. Using tomato puree as a base, it's livened up with onions and ginger—a silky, delicious sauce for chicken. The habaño heat, though, is almost an afterthought. It wasn't until I'd gnawed the bone clean that I felt the beginning of a burn at the corners of my mouth.

The venison chops that followed came from a whitetail doe my brother had taken along the Jefferson River last fall. I crusted them with the Chile Seasoning Blend, a Montana Mex dry blend of New Mexico, Pasilla, Guajillo and Ancho chiles that I hoped would ratchet up the heat.

After a quick sear to just past rare, I sliced the chops into strips that the editor sprinkled with coarse salt. The chile flavor was earthy and robust and went well with the Provençal rosé that had just been opened. I thought it tasted like the willow bottoms where the deer had lived, though no one agreed.

Regardless, our heat ritual was working. The day was growing warmer. The wind had fallen to a warm breeze and stayed high in the cottonwoods. Everyone was smiling, shedding their habitual winter layers. In order to keep our momentum, I reached for a bottle I knew would set our brows to sweating.

HAVING SPENT THE PAST FEW SUMMERS WORKING COMMERCIAL SALMON BOATS IN Alaska, I've come to cherish the fresh fillets I bring home at the end of the season. Especially for occasions such as this.

The sockeye is particularly good: firm, lean yet rich. When I laid one out on the table to pat dry, it was met with a chorus of guttural appreciation. My niece fairly screeched when she saw it, as she's come to love eating it at home. But when I covered it in a thick layer of the HotShot Pepper Blend from



LOOK FOR THE HORSE ON THE ROOF!

Bozeman's Premier Boutique & Tack Store

Where Equine Gear Meets Fashion

- 10 Minutes West of Bozeman on the Way to Big Sky
- Full-Service Boutique & Tack Store for Cowboys, Cowgirls & Equestrians

LET US OUTFIT YOU FOR A NIGHT
ON THE TOWN OR A DAY IN THE SADDLE

- Ariat
- Back on Track
- Barn Fly Trading
- Boulet Boots
- Dubarry of Ireland
- Goode Rider
- Johnny Was
- Kerrits
- Lilo Leather Goods
- Miller Ranch
- Rebecca Ray
- Ryan Michael
- Serratelli Hats
- Sunbody Hats

English, Western & Out on the Town



**FOUR CORNERS SADDLERY
& BOUTIQUE**

81770 GALLATIN ROAD
BOZEMAN, MT 59718

(406) 587-7503

MON.-SAT. 10 TO 6; SUN. 11 TO 4

The Gandy Dancer HotShot dry pepper blend coats a side of sockeye salmon hot off the grill.



Gandy Dancer in Kalispell, her smile faded.

“Is that hot?” she asked.

When I said yes, her shoulders collapsed and she turned away to find the three-legged dog.

Cathy Malarchick started and operates Gandy Dancer Gourmet Pepper. She grew up in Glendive, the daughter of a railroad worker who enjoyed food that bit him back.

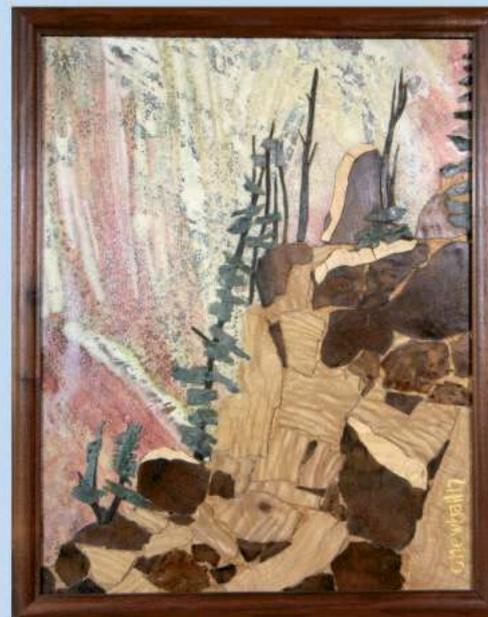
When she was just a young girl, her father created a dry pepper blend that the whole family used daily. Forty years later, after a career in public education, she decided to put her dad’s recipe in bottles, call it the Roundhouse Blend, and sell it around the state.

Working in a commissary kitchen in Evergreen, just outside of Kalispell, she dons a welder’s mask outfitted with hot pink air filters to protect herself from the fumes and debris, then grinds everything herself using an old electric coffee grinder.

“Dad would probably be smiling,” she told me, “knowing that his pepper was finally on the market. He always thought that’s what we should do with it. So I’m pretty pleased.”

Today Gandy Dancer is in 40 stores across Montana. The original Roundhouse Blend is designed for flavor, not heat. She blends Malabar peppercorns with dried vegetables for a complex flavor profile that complements everything from eggs to popcorn.

With the initial success of Roundhouse, she knew she needed another blend. So, with help from her brother



**Paintings and Sculptures
R.J. Newhall · Freeman Butts**

Alchemy Art

113 E. Callender Livingston MT

Working in a commissary kitchen in Evergreen, just outside of Kalispell, she dons a welder's mask outfitted with hot pink air filters to protect herself from the fumes and debris, then grinds everything herself using an old electric coffee grinder.

Steve, HotShot was born. Using the Roundhouse as a base, they added a devil's bouquet of hot peppers including Thai, habañero and Bhut Jolokia, also known as the ghost pepper and one of the world's hottest.

The editor had tasted the HotShot before and knew its power, so when he saw me cake it on the salmon he groaned, though stopped short of protest.

After the time it took to drink another glass of rosé, I pulled the fillet off the grill, and just in time. The red flesh was still translucent in the center—succulent and sweet. The flavors from the spices added a vegetal depth that worked well with the fish. Then the peppers hit and we had summer on our tongues.

The crowd huffed and puffed and mopped their brows as our war correspondent friend pulled in to join us. Beers were opened because only a fool would attempt to extinguish the ghost pepper's heat with a sweetish white wine. Conversation turned from the coming morel season to old stories of Livingston in the 1970s. My niece played with the photographer's big expensive camera, making everyone nervous except, somehow, the photographer. Soon my girlfriend emerged from the kitchen with our penultimate meal: Montana hot pulled chicken.

BORN IN A CHICKEN JOINT IN NASHVILLE, hot chicken is now a nationwide food craze. You can find versions of it in local restaurants and major fast food chains.

For our Montana version we made little sandwiches. We started with shredded breast and thigh meat from a plump chicken produced by the Hutterite colony near Martinsdale. We then smothered it with an entire bottle of Haba Haba "Dime" Sauce from Arthur Wayne in Missoula.

Of his eight sauces currently on shelves, he says this habañero-laced mix is his "number one go-to." The bite of lime and slight mango sweetness balanced well with the distinct habañero flavor without dulling its powerful heat, making it a perfect match for the chicken. Topped with a slice of Bubbie's pickle on a toasted bun, those little grenades had us sweating again.

For five years Arthur Wayne has sold his sauces in stores across western Montana. And while his were certainly the hottest samples we tried throughout the day, it's not his goal to torch your tastebuds.

"We don't do any novelty sauces," he said. "Sauces that are completely hot, that have no flavor."



MONTANA'S BEST MAGAZINE AND MONTANA'S LEADING INDEPENDENT RETAILERS

Get your copy at these fine stores!

AUGUSTA

Latigo and Lace, 122 Main St.

BILLINGS

Tobacco Row, 655 Main St.

Stogies, 2717 1st Ave. N.

This House of Books, 224 N. Broadway

Billings Logan International Airport gift shop

BOZEMAN

Bozeman Daily Chronicle, 2820 W. College St.

Bozeman Food Co-op, 908 W. Main St.

Country Bookshelf, 28 W. Main St.

Heeb's East Main Grocery, 544 E. Main St.

Museum of the Rockies Bookstore, 600 W. Kagy Blvd.

Poor Richard's, 16 N. Grand Ave.

Montana Gift Corral, Bozeman Airport

BUTTE

Books and Books, 206 W. Park St.

GREAT FALLS

Cassiopea Books, 721 Central Ave.

HAMILTON

Chapter One Bookstore, 252 Main St.

HELENA

Montana Historical Society Museum Store, 225 N. Roberts St.

KALISPELL

Montana Gift and Art (airport), 4170 U.S. Highway 2 E.

Norm's News, 37 Main St.

LIVINGSTON

Conley's Books and Music, 415 E. Lewis St.

Elk River Books, 120 N. Main St.

Sax and Fryer, 109 W. Callender St.

MISSOULA

Book Exchange, 2335 Brooks St.

Fact and Fiction, 220 N. Higgins Ave.

Rockin' Rudy's, 237 Blaine St.

Shakespeare & Co., 103 S. 3rd Street W.

UM Bookstore, 5 Campus Dr.

SEELEY LAKE

Grizzly Claw, 3187 Highway 83

STEVENSVILLE

Burnt Fork Market, 601 Main St.

Valley Drug, 301 Main St.

WEST YELLOWSTONE

Book Peddler, 106 N. Canyon St.

WHITEFISH

Bookworks, 244 Spokane Ave.

While heat is a factor, the goal is to build deep and distinct flavors using the right ingredients. And whether they come from his local farmers market or from the Western Montana Grower's Co-Op, those ingredients come almost exclusively from Montana.

"That's one of the things I really like to focus on," he told me. "It makes me feel good when I sell it to my customers. It's really nice to be able to bring the community together ... in one bottle."

The sauce we used for our final dish is perhaps the best reflection of that "Montana" ethos.

Though it registers as an 8 on Wayne's own 1-to-10 heat scale, the initial taste of his Huckleberry Ghost Sauce lands like a light huckleberry syrup. This, of course, is followed immediately by the blaze of ghost pepper, which haunts long afterward.

The finale was simple. I sliced the tapered ends of a veal-like whitetail backstrap into 1-inch chunks, salted



Meat for dessert: flash-seared venison backstrap chunks doused in Arthur Wayne's Huckleberry Ghost hot sauce.



58 PEREGRINE WAY
BOZEMAN, MT 59718
406-556-8417
WWW.MONTANATILE.COM
TILE • STONE • FABRICATION

a **FUN** * little
OUTDOOR * store
in * downtown
LIVINGSTON *

Timber Trails
THE OUTDOOR COMPANY
309 W. Park St. Livingston, Montana • 222-9550



and peppered them, then tossed them in a ripping hot cast-iron pan with some sesame oil. After just 15 seconds I scooped them onto a cutting board and doused them with the Huckleberry Ghost.

The grassiness of the venison mixed with the sweetness of the huckleberry and the fierce heat of the ghost pepper. It tasted like August.

I had only cooked half of the meat to start, and the group immediately wanted more. It was hot, yes. But it was also delicious. And that was the whole point. It seemed like they couldn't quit eating.

WITH THE FEASTING completed, the convivial spirit among family and friends reached a crescendo. Soon,

conversations quieted and slowed. While my niece rolled like a log down the shallow hill in the yard the rest of us sat around the picnic table trying to wash the heat down with the last of our drinks.

Our host turned off the grill while we went about cleaning up the mess. One by one our lunch party dwindled. First the photographer, then the editor, then the war correspondent.

Eventually my family and I gathered our things and made our way to our cars. We thanked our host who walked us out. Before pulling away I asked him if he was going to get back to his chores.

No, he said. The air was still calm. The sun was still warm. It felt like summer.

He planned to enjoy it. 



BILLINGS LOGAN INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

WHETHER TRAVELING FOR BUSINESS OR PLEASURE,
WITH EXCEPTIONAL AIR SERVICE AND ACCESSIBILITY,
WE GET YOU HERE.

Our convenient flight options now include
daily service to Dallas.



- Daily Direct Flights
- Weekly Direct Flights
- Seasonal Direct Flights
- Daily Flights in Montana







Photos Courtesy of VisitBillings and Montana Office of Tourism and Business Development

www.flybillings.com