

Wolfdale's,
Tahoe City, Calif.



scene

eat Confessions of a Ski-Town Chef

Four culinary pros share the highs and lows of the high-altitude food biz.

BY DEVON O'NEILL

TO THE DREAMER AND SCHEMER, OWNING A RESTAURANT IN A SKI TOWN sounds like paradise: ski pow by day, feed hungry souls by night. But it's hardly that simple. A majority of new restaurants fail, and only one in 10 makes it more than a decade, with five going under in the first year alone. What determines which eateries thrive in the highly competitive ski-town market? The biggest factor is often the person in white. Here we profile four veteran chefs with unique perspectives on how they've made the ski-town restaurant dream a lasting reality.



COURTESY OF WOLFDALÉ'S/SHEA EVANS (2)

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF SUGARBUSH; COURTESY OF RELISH & TWIST; COURTESY OF CHRISTINA'S RESTAURANT



THE LIFER: GERRY NOONEY

Sugarbush Resort, Vt.
Working in the food industry is the only job Gerry Nooney has ever had. Nooney has spent most of his 55 years in Vermont's Mad River Valley, where he oversees 13 eateries as executive chef and vice president of culinary operations at Sugarbush. (He also gets out on the slopes 100 days a season—and has for the past 30 years.) He has local sources for everything from pork shoulders and nutty cheddar cheese to squash and the wild mushrooms he picks himself, and he's a driver in the movement toward healthy sideside dining. "I tell my staff I want to see five colors on the plate," says Nooney, the 2009 Vermont Chef of the Year. He is quick to point out that it's a much more talented staff than it used to be—what Nooney calls the biggest change in resort dining, along with fresh ingredients. "I have a guy who trained at a school in Holland, another guy who went to Cornell, I've got a girl who went to school in Switzerland. We can attract quality people because we're actually making real food."



THE EVERYMAN: MATT FACKLER

Relish and Twist, Breckenridge, Colo.
Matt Fackler cooked at a dozen restaurants before he opened his own in 2006. Relish, a contemporary gourmet bistro perched above the Blue River in downtown Breckenridge, quickly became one of the most popular places in town, and in 2011 Fackler, a snowboarder and splitboarder who rides the slopes of Breckenridge about 60 days per season, partnered with a friend and opened another restaurant, Twist, one block away. The two businesses together employ 30 full-time workers, a measure of success that Fackler—who trained at the Culinary Institute of America, then ski-bummed in Summit County for a decade—cites above any critical acclaim. "The nice thing about cooking is no matter where you go, people have to eat," Fackler says. "But could I go to Napa Valley tomorrow and start a successful restaurant? Absolutely not. I think you have to put your finger on a map and go live there for a while—get to know the people."



THE IMPORT: CRISTINA CECCATELLI COOK

Cristina's Restaurant, Ketchum, Idaho
The last thing Cristina Ceccatelli Cook ever thought she'd do for a living is cook. She was raised in Florence, Italy, in a family steeped in Italian food traditions, but when she grew up she became a teacher. It wasn't until she followed a man (her eventual husband) to Ketchum, Idaho, in 1989 that she considered putting her talent to use. "Someone said, why don't you open a restaurant? You're Italian, you don't need to know how to 'cook'—just do your food," Cook recalls with a laugh. "And I haven't slept since." Cook is one of the few ski-town chefs who doesn't currently ski. She skied with her family in the Italian Alps, but when she arrived in Ketchum, she traded in her skis for a yoga mat, preferring her hot yoga practice to the snow. "But I love to look at the mountains," she says. Cristina's Restaurant, opened in 1993, serves a wide variety of patrons, from the private-jet celebrity set to locals who appreciate the cozy, be-yourself atmosphere—not to mention the fresh prosciutto, European cheeses, and tastiest local ingredients Cook can find. "When people say, 'If this is organic, why don't you write it's organic?' I say, 'No, you should write if it's not!'" Cook says. "I don't compromise. I can't. The day I do, I'll be closed."

THE ALCHEMIST: DOUGLAS DALE

Wolfdale's, Tahoe City, Calif.
When Douglas Dale was in college, he spent part of a year living abroad in a Japanese temple. The owner of that temple happened to own a restaurant, and Dale, whose father ran a nightclub in New York, helped out while he was there. After he graduated, Dale apprenticed with acclaimed chef Hiroshi Hayashi in Boston, cooking for John Lennon and Yoko Ono, Orson Welles, and Gloria Swanson before moving to Lake Tahoe and opening Wolfdale's in 1978. Located in the heart of Tahoe City, Wolfdale's reflects its owner's diverse background and zest for experimentation. "We call it 'cuisine unique,' which gives us a license to do fusions," Dale says. "You could see sashimi and basil pesto on the same menu." During its 37 years in business, Wolfdale's has employed Dale's wife, son, and daughter, as well as a loyal staff that weathers Tahoe's bad snow years along with the good ones. "The joke around here is you're either dead or buried—you're either dead quiet or buried busy," says Dale, who recently transitioned from downhill to skate skiing. "So you better have a get-it-while-you-can attitude." Another key to success: goodwill. "We want people to feel like we are them and they are us," Dale says. Nothing, however, trumps true passion. "I could cook when I'm tired, sick, or have very little food in the pantry. I just really am fascinated by the alchemy and the magic of cooking and health."