

# *Smith Fork*

BETWEEN TELLURIDE AND ASPEN, DUDE-RANCH DINING THAT CATERS TO HIGH-END COWBOYS.

**F**ine dining is not usually a prerequisite for dude ranches, but it is at the **Smith Fork Ranch** in Colorado.

Owners Marley and Linda Hodgson, who split their time between Colorado and New York City, take pride in showcasing Western regional cuisine with sophisticated fare. That might mean chilled asparagus soup with lobster, sweet corn, and truffle cream; beet salad with shaved fennel, goat cheese, pine nuts, TLC greens, and orange vinaigrette; and seared elk loin served with cumin carrot puree and Paonia cherry demi glace. Whatever the dish, it's invariably delicious-and fresh.

"Nearly all of the fruits and vegetables we use-plus most of the meats, poultry, and eggs-are organic and locally grown or raised in the area," says executive chef Jim Ackard, who frequently travels from farm to farm to pick up ingredients. The ranch also boasts an extensive wine cellar with about 300 labels from all over the world, including several that are locally produced.

Located outside the tiny town of Crawford between Telluride and Aspen, Smith Fork is a stone's throwaway from the North Fork Valley. Bordering the Smith Fork of the Gunnison River on the western slope of the Rockies, this area of verdant hills turns out to be perfect for farming and wine-growing, earning the region the name "the Napa Valley of the West."

For cowboys who want a dining experience to remember, mark your calendar for the second weekend in September, when Smith Fork hosts its annual culinary weekend. You're in for cooking demonstrations, talks by local vintners or farmers, tours, and exquisite five-course wine-pairing meals. The event can be hands-on: Last year the group went to Orchard Valley Farms to pick fruits and vegetables, which the chef then used to whip up an elegant riverside picnic in the afternoon. The next day they visited an elk farm, feasting on elk kabobs and sage cheddar for lunch. Designed to appeal to novices as well as gourmet cooks, Smith Fork's culinary weekend adheres to Ackard's open-door policy, meaning guests can come into the kitchen to help and to learn as much or as little as they want.

The cuisine highlights regional ingredients with French techniques and an eye toward the international, such as black cod with Moroccan style roasted potato, eggplant, and tomato broth. This year, however, Ackard, a former executive chef at Harmon's in Telluride, will also focus on a combination of Western comfort foods, particularly at breakfast-where you will find buttermilk biscuits and gravy, farm-fresh steak and eggs, German apple pancakes cooked in cast iron with apple-cinnamon syrup-and dinner showcases.

While cooking and eating are a big part of the Smith Fork culinary weekend, this is a luxurious guest ranch with plenty to do besides eating. Smith Fork has a full stable of horses and excellent trails through rugged mountain slopes and flower-filled pastures with breathtaking views of the West Elk Range of the Rocky Mountains. There's also hiking in the Gunnison National Forest, fly-fishing (trout ponds, three miles of private river, and a fly-tying table), archery, river rafting, and Frisbee golf. Attentive guides take care of your every need. The accommodations befit a place that loves to cater to guests. The original buildings on Smith Fork Ranch were built by hand between 1890 and 1950. Four private cabins, the guest lodge, the Dinner Bell Cook House, and the Old Elk lodge have been built or restored and refurbished with modern

comforts within their original historic character. "Everything on the ranch is customized to suit our guests," says general manager Andy Adams. "Consider it your ranch away from home." **U**

- Diane Weiland

**Smith Fork Ranch** is open late May through mid-October. Culinary weekend at the Smith Fork Ranch this year is September 11-14. For more information, call live-in ranch managers Andy or Alyssa Adams at (970) 921-3454, or visit [www.smithforkranch.com](http://www.smithforkranch.com).

## Olathe Sweet Corn Soup

*(Serves 6)*

Olathe, a town near Smith Fork Ranch, is famous for the sweet corn it produces. Here is one of former chef Bob Isaacson's favorite ways to prepare it.

6 ears of corn, kernels cut off and cobs reserved 2 quarts water  
1 bay leaf  
2 tablespoons vegetable oil 3 garlic cloves, chopped  
1 medium onion, chopped  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup half-and-half  
Salt and pepper to taste  
2 tablespoons grated Manchego cheese  
(substitute Parmesan if desired)  
1 Anaheim chile, roasted, seeded, skinned, and finely chopped

Cover the cobs in water with bay leaf in a large saucepan. Simmer for 40 minutes. Strain and reserve broth. In a big pot, saute onion and garlic in oil until soft but not brown. Add corn; season with salt and pepper. Cover and cook until softened. Then pour in corn broth and simmer for another 10 minutes. Puree and strain; then add half-and-half and simmer another 5 minutes. Adjust season ing. Garnish with grated Manchego cheese and chopped roasted Anaheim chile peppers.

*(Recipe courtesy of Smith Fork Ranch former chef Bob Isaacson.)*

## SMITH FORK RANCH PE

*(Serves 4)*

Colorado's Golden Triangle is home to some of the best stone fruits grown. One of chef Jim Ackard's favorite late summer desserts is fresh Paonia peaches baked, topped with a streusel crust, and served with fresh-churned vanilla ice cream. This recipe freezes well and can be used on top of muffins.

4 large ripe peaches (Select them "fresh and incredible," chef Ackard says.)

2 tablespoons sugar

### STREUSEL

1 cup cold butter, cut into 1/4-inch cubes 1 cup sliced almonds, blanched

$\frac{1}{2}$  cup brown sugar

$\frac{1}{2}$  cup white sugar

1 tablespoon nutmeg  $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon cardamom  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup oats

$\frac{1}{2}$  cup flour

4 individual baking dishes or a 10-inch shallow baking dish (approximately 2 inches deep)

Cut the peaches into large chunks or slices. Toss with the sugar, and let set for 1 hour at room temperature.

Cut butter and place in freezer to get extra cold while mixing the other ingredients. Work the cold butter into the flour portion of the recipe until the butter cubes are half their original size-probably 5 minutes of gentle kneading (take care not to work the butter until it gets warm). Mix in the rest of the ingredients until they are evenly distributed.

Place marinated peaches and juice in baking dish and cover top with the streusel (no more than 1/4-inch deep). Bake in a 400-degree oven until top is golden brown and the peach juice is bubbly. Remove from oven and serve warm, or at room temperature, with fresh-churned vanilla ice cream.

*(Recipe courtesy of chef Jim Ackard of Smith Fork Ranch.)*