

BEST OF DENVER

Ten Great Colorado Road Trip Bars

SKYLER MCKINLEY | OCTOBER 13, 2021 | 11:49AM



Take the winding road to the Bucksnort Saloon. **Courtesy Galina Bye**



These watering holes are all worth a trip – and a round or two or three. And I should

know, because I just [bought a road-trip bar](#) in Oak Creek, the [Oak Creek Tavern](#).

Fortunately, these favorites are all close to places where you can hang your hat and rest your head after you've settled up.

Enterprise Bar & Grill

3 North Glasgow Avenue, Rico

It's billed as the "sixth oldest bar in Colorado," so when you drink at the 'Prise, you end up drinking in a whole lot of history, too. It's an intimate locals' joint that also welcomes bikers, hikers and everyone else exploring this veritable movie set of a tiny town just 27 miles from Telluride.

Swing Station

3311 County Road 54G, Laporte

It's not unheard of to see horses tied up at the front of the Swing Station, a honky-tonk that offers several shows a week. If you're musically inclined, consider coming for the open-mic night. Since the bar is just ten minutes from downtown Fort Collins, it couldn't be easier to arrange accommodations and a safe ride – so stay late enough for the singing to get sloppy.

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The Fortune Club

300 Victor Avenue, Victor

Who needs Deadwood when we have Victor? Rebuilt after a fire in 1899 with money from Adolph Coors, the Fortune Club is surrounded by more than sixty other Victorian structures. Many, like the Fortune, are former brothels. If you plan to stay out late, book a room across the street at the boutique Black Monarch Hotel

at late, book a room across the street at the boutique Black Monarch Hotel.

Woody Creek Tavern

2858 Upper River Road, Woody Creek

Filled with Polaroids of local ne'er-do-wells, there's enough lore under the classic tin ceiling to match the heavy pours. This place was a favorite haunt of Hunter S. Thompson, and his spirit lives on in eclectic decor that makes you forget you're just fifteen minutes from Aspen's tony downtown.



Live music and cold beer can be found at the Little Bear Saloon **Jon Solomon**

Little Bear Saloon

28075 CO-74, Evergreen

With names carved into the bar and bras and dollar bills hanging from the ceiling, the Little Bear is exactly the kind of place where you'd expect to see a legendary live

show – which is why everyone from Leon Russell to Count Basie have played here over the years.

The Trinidad Lounge

421 North Commercial Street, Trinidad

You've probably heard about Trinidad's economic and cultural renaissance, and the 'Dad Lounge has played a big part in that. Reopened for the first time in a decade under the steady hands of Curt Wallach and Suzanne Magnuson, veterans of Denver's hi-dive, the 'Dad is comfortable, colorful, and regularly features world-class musical acts.

The Bucksnot Saloon & Family Restaurant

15921 South Elk Creek Road, Pine

Nearly every surface in the Bucksnot is festooned with dollar bills, save for its famous Antler Taps that serve – you guessed it – Antler Ale. It's a drinker's rite of passage to add your buck to the Bucksnot Saloon – if you can find any space on the ceiling or walls. And that's if you can find the place at all: It's hidden well off the beaten path in Sphinx Park, near Pine.

Lulu's Inn

33355 East Highway 36, Watkins

With high ceilings, plenty of neon, a huge dance floor and the chance to cook your own meal, Lulu's is a classic drinkers' bar. This roadhouse is good for both steak and suds, and it's the perfect excuse to take a trip to an outpost at the outskirts of Colorado's eastern plains.

Gray's Coors Tavern, Star Bar, Gus' Tavern, Eilers Place

Various locations in Pueblo

You've got to love a bar with a beer in its name, and doubly so when it's Gray's Coors Tavern, the purported inventor of Pueblo's world-famous chile-smothered Slopper – though the nearby Star Bar makes a pretty good claim, too. Try both. For more Steel

though the nearby Star Bar makes a pretty good claim, too. Try both. For more Steel City history, saddle up with a schooner and a Dutch lunch at Gus' Tavern and the coldest beers in town at Eilers Place.

Kochevar's Saloon & Gaming Hall

127 Elk Avenue, Crested Butte

One cool thing we get to do as Coloradans is drink in, and drink at, the places patronized by legendary Westerners. Butch Cassidy is said to have left his revolver behind after a bad night at Kochevar's, but you should have better luck. Located at the end of Crested Butte's main drag, this bar has plenty of pub games to keep you busy on low-key nights, though there's always a good chance you'll run into a neighborhood party.

*Skyler McKinley is a fourth-generation Coloradan and owner of the **Oak Creek Tavern**, a neighborhood bar in the rural heart of the Yampa Valley. A former political staffer and the State of Colorado's founding deputy pot czar, he now oversees AAA's regional public affairs division. He lives in Denver, but drinks – and occasionally tends bar – in Oak Creek.*

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Short Stop: The Pork-Let Steals the Show With Photo-Friendly Korean Cooking

MARK ANTONATION | OCTOBER 15, 2021 | 9:42AM

The Pork-Let's tornado fried rice makes for great social media fodder. **Mark Antonation**



Denver's dining scene is making a big comeback – and we're hungry to go out. With so many new ventures and old favorites to visit after more than a year of restaurant shutdowns and restrictions, the choices can be overwhelming. So we're serving up Short Stop, with recommendations for things that should definitely be on your culinary short list. This week, dig into the Pork-Let, one of Aurora's newest –

and trendiest – Korean eateries.

What: The Pork-Let

Where: 12201 East Mississippi Avenue, Unit 123B, Aurora

When: Open daily for lunch from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., and for dinner from 4:30 to 8:30 p.m.

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The crunch pork cutlet comes on its own metal grill. **Mark Antonation**

The place: Aurora's Pacific Ocean Marketplace serves as a magnet for shoppers looking for all manner of Asian groceries – from live seafood to handmade dumplings – at the northeast corner of South Peoria Street and East Mississippi Avenue. And the surrounding shopping center is a kind of outdoor food hall, with Korean, Vietnamese and Chinese eateries drawing a diverse Aurora population.

The space that the Pork-Let now occupies was previously home to Chinese Noodles, a specialist in Luosi and Guilin noodles, rarities outside of their home regions in China, and now unfortunately missing in the metro-Denver dining scene. Fortunately, the menu at the Pork-Let also offers unique dishes that may be popular on social media but are otherwise hard to come by here.

The dining room is small, with only a few tables and a bar-height counter along the front window so you can look out onto the vast parking lot while enjoying your meal. Order at the counter and then grab a seat until your number is called. The Pork-Let makes takeout easy, too, and much of the menu travels well if you don't live more than fifteen to twenty minutes away.

What you're eating: The restaurant is named for breaded and fried pork cutlets, so of course that's the main attraction. The namesake dish (\$14.95) comes with macaroni salad and coleslaw drenched in a tasty black-sesame dressing, and the cutlet itself sits atop a mini grill so that the underside stays crispy. Whether you opt for pork, chicken or the tempting Cheeselet (\$16.95) – pork oozing a generous helping of mozzarella cheese – the result is a tender slab of meat coated in a crunchy panko crust, with a mild, tomato-based sauce for added flavor.





The Pork-Let's wings get points for flavor and texture, even if they aren't as showy as other dishes. **Mark Antonation**

If a social media-worthy lunch or dinner is your goal, look no further than the tornado fried rice (\$12.95), a showy omelet blanketing flavorful fried rice that is a variation on Japanese omurice. Choose bacon or Spam, then behold the glorious swirl of glossy tornado omelet, made by twisting the thin sheet of egg with a pair of chopsticks as it cooks in a nonstick pan. The Pork-Let's version of this dish rests in a pool of tomato-based sauce, which looks great but doesn't pack as much of a punch as you'd expect from such a bold presentation.

While the cutlets and tornado rice steal the show visually, the Korean fried chicken wings here could be the best bet. The enormous, meaty wings (\$12 for six) are coated in a crunchy, sticky jacket best enjoyed straight from the kitchen rather than to go. You have several sauce options to choose from, but none hit spice levels even marginally fiery. Our choice of the "black and white" barbecue wings was balanced on the sweet-tangy scale, and the meat beneath the thick coating was shockingly juicy. But compared to many other Korean restaurants in Aurora, the Pork-Let's sauces stay on the mellow end of the spectrum, so if you're looking for a mouth-searing blast, this isn't the place for you.

It is, however, definitely the place for something new and fun, especially if you tack on appetizers like sweet potato sticks (kind of like long, skinny egg rolls), pan-fried dumplings or the Chicklet sandwich (fried chicken on fluffy white bread).

Take pictures, make videos, pig out!

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| CHEF NEWS |

What's Cooking? Four Denver Restaurateurs Take Stock of the Dining Scene Today

PATRICIA CALHOUN | OCTOBER 15, 2021 | 7:02AM

Dave Query at Lola, which closed this fall and will turn into a Post Chicken & Beer. **Big Red F**



On a Zoom back in April 2020, when everyone hoped the pandemic would be under control in a matter of weeks, Dave Query, the chef who went on to found the **Big Red E** restaurant group – and, along with wife Dana Faulk Query, just won the Noel & Tammy Cunningham Humanitarian Award from the **Colorado Restaurant Association** – threw some cold water on the discussion. He was worried about what would happen not just that summer, but the following winter...and the winter after that, he said.

Turns out, Query was right about the challenges that restaurateurs would not just face in the early days of the pandemic, but would continue to grapple with today. So we decided to pick up where that conversation left off, and contacted some of the most experienced – and outspoken – members of Denver’s dining community to talk about where the industry’s been and where it’s headed.

In addition to Query, we queried longtime marketing expert **John Imbergamo**, who started out with Mr. Steak and now works with **Crafted Concepts** (the group founded by Jen Jasinski and Beth Gruitch), as well as Jacqueline Bonanno of **Bonanno Concepts** and Juan Padró of **Culinary Creative**. As a special bonus, Josh Wolkon of

Secret Sauce – a previous winner of the Noel & Tammy Cunningham Humanitarian Award – served up a tasty essay in answer to our questions.

Bon appétit.



John Imbergamo runs the Imbergamo Group. **Courtesy of John Imbergamo**

What lessons has the industry learned over the past eighteen months?

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John Imbergamo: We learned that being nimble was the key to survival. Government shuts down inside dining? Crank up pick-up and delivery systems and create new patio spaces where streets and sidewalks once stood. Labor shortages creating a crisis in the restaurant? Eliminate meal periods, trim menu offerings and go “all

hands on deck” with owners, managers and chefs working shifts. Government rules and relief programs dictating daily operations and survival? Get involved with EatDenver and the Colorado Restaurant Association to influence officials and let them know how important restaurants are to the economy.

Dave Query: There have been a few really important lessons learned over the last eighteen months. Kind of the same takeaways the investigative crew must have made after looking at the Titanic disaster. “More lifeboats, watch out for icebergs!”

I think everyone is more efficient. More efficient with labor and scheduling, hours of operation, menu layout, less likely to put up with bullshit from customers, employees, landlords, bankers, vendors. More calculating. Budgeting, labor analysis, costing efficiencies – it’s harder to make a buck, and everyone is taking it a whole lot more seriously than just waiting until the end of of the month to “see how we did.”

Juan Padró: There have been a lot of lessons learned, some good and some bad. From the perspective of the independent restaurant, I think the need to have a voice, to organize and to have a lobby are probably right at the top of my list. We’ve had some groups help, for sure, but we have a long way to go. I’m really encouraged by some of the leaders we saw emerge over the past eighteen months. I’d like to see those groups trying to help and lobby, engage those who really stepped up in these difficult times, not just the big names in the industry who as a group really didn’t do a good job. And I don’t want that to sound like criticism of anyone, because in times like these, people react differently. But it’s worth noting that the real heroes were more often than not the small operators who don’t have a PR machine behind them. That’s where the inspirational work was being done. The celebrity chef worship, I think, has slowed down quite a bit from those in the industry. And there has been a greater level of respect and admiration on a more local level as it became very clear who was a leader. As an operator, I paid close attention and have a clear picture as to who I want on my teams.

Jacqueline Bonanno: I can’t speak for the industry, but I can tell you that I learned how resilient my co-workers are and how loyal our clients are. The law changed every two weeks, it seemed, and we changed right along with it – dine inside, dine outside, six-foot spacing, mask/no mask, vaccine/no vaccine. Just. Wow.



Frank and Jacqueline Bonanno run everything from Mizuna to the Denver Milk Market. **Bonanno Concepts**

What changes do you see in how restaurants will be operating in the future?

Query: To-go is here to stay. Everyone is figuring out how to properly send food out the front door. I think we will see fewer huge restaurants: higher dollars per square foot in smaller spaces. And in my opinion, all marginal restaurants will fail. There will be fewer mediocre restaurants in the future – the dining public will no longer tolerate mediocrity.

Imbergamo: While the current labor shortage is the top issue facing restaurants in the short run, value will lead the hit list for the foreseeable future. Consumers are going to have to adjust their “value barometer” to reflect the changes in labor rates, commodity prices and energy increases that are happening or are on the horizon. Price increases and shrinking portion sizes are inevitable. The days of the \$12 hamburger are now the days of the \$16 hamburger, and guests will simply have to get used to it or give up the pleasure of eating in restaurants. It’s not like those price increases aren’t happening in the grocery store, too.

Padró: You know, it’s an industry that’s in a constant state of change. I think QR codes are here to stay. I think making sure your online presence is as good as your in-store

are here to stay. I think making sure your online presence is as good as your in-store presence will be important. I think you'll see a good bit of M&A activity. Business models will change as costs increase. You have this contingent out there that thinks raising prices is the answer to increased COGS and wage requirements, and I'd encourage people to strongly disregard that as any type of long-term solution. That's very dangerous advice, and ignorant beyond words.

Bonanno: I hope carry-away cocktails become a permanent thing, because what a way to round out a meal! We all got to up our takeout game, and I believe the systems – Tock, Toast – that allowed us to implement that in a cost-effective way are only going to improve. I think everyone has higher expectations for a restaurant meal at home, which is a fantastic thing, and virtual cocktails and appetizers in the winter will always be a wonderful way to connect. And for crying out loud, let's honor the workforce that stayed with us by paying them a living wage.



Juan Padró's projects stretch from Denver to Aspen to New Orleans. **Esther Lee Leach**

How do you see other industry developments – third-party delivery systems, for example – affecting restaurants?

Imbergamo: Restaurateurs will pick and choose the pandemic-related developments that work for them. Say “yes” to extended patios, limited meal periods, restricted

menus and constant recruitment. Say “maybe” to third-party delivery after carefully analyzing its costs and effect on brand.

Query: Doordash, Uber Eats, Grubhub – none of those companies have made a dime. As Wall Street demands better performance from these public companies, their only road to profitability is raising fees for both the vendor/restaurant and the customer/diner. The fees are already too high on both ends. They’re going to get clobbered even if their stock prices continue to rise since going public.

Padró: Third-party delivery is here to stay. It has a trillion-dollar market cap. How it affects the standalone, sit-down restaurant will vary. I think these platforms will continue to get better, and they need to. They will begin to replace things like the drive-through window. And for meal prep, etc., I think you’ll see a lot of movement there. As far as to-go food at restaurants, I mean the obvious stuff is menu engineering and perhaps even having some different offerings than in-store. I think packaging is a big factor as well. Will commissary become a bigger thing? Probably. Some of that will have to be combined with ghost kitchens, and some of that will be event space or even hybrid retail/food models; basically some secondary use because of the cost of construction and real estate.

Bonanno: Our old reservation platform didn’t evolve during the shutdown. It didn’t really embrace or understand take-away food or virtual celebrations, and we were forced to switch to a system that recognized all of those components at a tenth of the price. Yes, third-party delivery systems are problematic. Here’s the thing, though: Our guests evolved right alongside their preferred restaurants. They figured out QR codes in concert with us. They learned to pack phones, masks, vaccination cards and whatever else it takes to have a good meal into a restaurant. Who didn’t “pivot”? There are businesses that lift restaurant workers, potent satellites of who we are and what we do, that I believe will be markedly different in 2023.

Who wants to watch reality television that insults and dramatizes when David Chang is just filming great cooking right from his home kitchen? (I had my fill of that tension this past year, didn’t you?) The Beard awards didn’t adapt – they just shut down for 2021 and pretended they hadn’t already chosen their winners. We lost some of our strongest local food writers right here in Denver (to, what, the CRA?), which

speaks to an entire peripheral community unable to adapt. To pivot. What on earth happened with the Aspen Food & Wine Festival? Elite PR firms seem to be doing just fine – but how do you suppose their clients are feeling about those dues and their representatives' ability to shape food stories from home computers while restaurant workers are out in the snow building yurts?

And how do you see diners' tastes changing? When they go to a restaurant, what are they looking for?

Imbergamo: Just as pre-pandemic diners grew accustomed to replacing meals cooked at home with nightly visits to restaurants, they'll modify their post-pandemic dining habits to occasionally include delivery and takeout after becoming comfortable with those service methods during the crisis.

Denver's minimum wage increases to \$15.87 on January 1, 2022, with minimal effect on full-service restaurant wages, which have already blown by those levels. Importantly, however, Denver's tipped minimum wage notches up to \$12.85 on the same date, which could influence the tipping and payment model for restaurateurs and consumers. More service charges, modified tip pooling and possibly lower tip percentages from consumers when they realize they're looking at price increases to pay for these wage bumps.

Query: Outstanding food. Everyone hunkered down during the pandemic and learned to cook. So bullshit food and service will not be tolerated. Mediocre dining experiences will be spotlighted and harassed. Guests want excitement, thrills, new education, new dazzle – but it has to be platformed on solid cooking and service skills.

Padró: I'm not sure if tastes are changing. I think now people have to ask what's more important – food and hospitality or vibe. And that's different for every person, so whatever the mix is that works for you, there are places out there that will satisfy your needs. A few months ago, I would have answered this question very differently. The conversation would have been more around social impact, but in Denver it seems that we have lost our steam on that subject. That's not a huge surprise in a mostly white city where life is pretty magical. I do hope we can get back to that,

though, and I think that would impact the Denver restaurant scene in a really positive way.

Bonanno: My understanding of my own clients is that they want to be respected and treated kindly and joyously when they dine out – and it is such an honor and delight to do so. Shoot, it's a treat to be out in public among friends. Dining out is a privilege and a celebration. Don't you want to feel celebrated? To let the politics and unkindness just melt away into this perfect bite and that perfect sip? Forget about the popularity contest or the current buzz: I truly believe that for a good while, people will just want to be in talented hands of professionals who celebrate them with deliciousness.

This story originally appeared in Bites, our annual guide to the local dining scene, which was inserted in the October 14 issue of Westword.

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