

an experimental cure

Bison Mountain's Grant Parry is creating two delicacies from scratch: prosciutto from the shoulder of a hog and a green gourmet restaurant in Banff.

by Chris Turner

We're in the back hallway of a retail complex in Banff, Grant Parry and I, and he is standing in the doorway of a walk-in refrigerator clutching a big industrial hook, at the end of which dangles a significant lump of dead weight swathed in frayed cheesecloth like a limb wounded in the Great War. It's a remarkable thing he's got there; I won't claim to know everything there is to know about Banff's storied history of wild adventures, obsessive mountaineers and incorrigible rogues, but I'd still be willing to bet Parry's lump might be the first of its kind in these parts. So it's with keen and mounting interest that I follow him back up to his kitchen—he's the executive chef at the magnificent Bison Mountain Bistro, one of the newest and most distinctive restaurants to grace this grand old resort town—and watch as he lays that tattered bundle upon the counter and starts cutting through the twine and old cheesecloth.

When he's done, he looks up at me with a wry half-grin that's equal parts playful and wary, and announces, "This is gonna be a good one. This might freak some people out."

Parry peels back the last of the cheesecloth, revealing a lumpy mass of thick, white gelatinous goop the size of a medicine ball. It's encrusted with gravelly black dust and dotted with telltale spots of bluish mould. This is, it turns out, the shoulder of a hog, which has been hanging in his storage fridge for 10 months. This is prosciutto in its

natural state, and Parry's maybe the first chef ever to make his own in this land of run-of-the-mill bar & grills. This might be the next step in the evolution of a new kind of institution—the green gourmet restaurant—and to understand how Grant Parry came to the point of curing his own hog shoulders, you need to understand a bit more about the place in which he's come to do so.

So let's rewind, quickly, to Parry standing there with his cheesecloth lump in the downstairs storage fridge. Let's ask him to hang on a sec while we take a quick run down to the parking garage. See that weird little cement protrusion there in the corner? That thing the size and shape of an old-time well? Well, that's as vivid a symbol as any of the singular approach to resort-town development that led to this complex, which goes by the name of Bison Courtyard. Look through the well's mouth, and you can peer right down at the water table—a visual reminder, so the builders hope, of the fragile ecosystem in which their building stands.

(complete with panoramic 360-degree views of the surrounding peaks), its greenest bathrooms (complete with composting toilets, which took some getting used to) and maybe its least wasteful kitchen—complete with a chef obsessed of late with finding uses for whole hogs.

WHICH BRINGS US BACK TO GRANT PARRY, standing there slicing through that thick white layer of pork fat to reveal the delicate ham beneath. The prosciutto begins to fall away in bright-pink sheets laced with thin rivulets of fat. It forms a pile on Parry's cutting board, which he separates from the scrap heap of old lard. Parry lifts the whole joint, sniffs. He waxes poetic for a moment about the deep, earthy, fermented smell you get when you start with a naturally grazed, antibiotic-free local hog from Broek Pork Acres, near Lethbridge. You take its shoulder and hip joints and follow the instructions in *Charcuterie: The Craft of Salting, Smoking, and Curing* by Michael Ruhlman and Brian Polyn to the letter, and you add nothing but salt and a protective layer of pork fat and a bit of crushed pepper (which traditionally would've kept the flies off as it hung outdoors to cure). Parry talks about lard-encrusted sausages he once saw hanging from a stall at a train station in France. Talks about how they add nitrates to cured meats to do nothing but maintain that enticing pink hue his prosciutto's earned on its own merits. He doesn't take a taste, though, not yet.

He's a bit nervous, actually. So am I. When I first called to inquire about the prosciutto, he mentioned how he hadn't tried it yet because he didn't want to kill anybody, least of all himself. This was, after all, uncooked pork. He was flying without a net here. Which, again, points to the unique kind of place Bison Courtyard is.

Rivard and Sherret began with the esthetic conceit of "Rocky Mountain Comfort Food"—local ingredients, hearty dishes, that sort of thing—but then their neighbours turned out to be obsessed with organic this and biodegradable that. The thinking soon spread to their kitchen, and Parry started ordering in whole animals. Lambs, at first, because he wanted to get his hands on uncommon cuts, and then pigs, and finally bison. It was cheaper to buy whole animals, for one thing, and beyond that it meant less waste and an extra helping of support for Western Canada's fledgling sustainable-ranching industry. (See also Ewe-Nique Farms of Picture Butte, Saskatchewan's Prairie Dawn Bison and B.C.'s Maple Hill Farms, not to mention Highwood Crossing, Hotchkiss Herbs and Produce and Sylvan Star—all of which supply the bistro.)

Bison Mountain Bistro's menu soon overflowed with bison cheeks and bison onion soup, ever-changing "daily cuts" of lamb and pork. The kitchen became a kind of throwback pantry, its counters piled with great jars of preserved oranges and lemons and pickled mushrooms. The shelves of the general store down at street level soon overflowed with



Bison Courtyard is rife with this kind of stuff: those cement blocks that form the parking garage's walls, for example, are partially composed of fly ash, the waste residue of coal-burning power plants. The building's main lobby is watched over by a 6,000-year-old bison skull salvaged with great care during the site excavation. The entire complex forms a squared-off U around the Old Crag Cabin, which is one of the oldest structures in town, the preservation of which was the initial impetus for this whole meticulous re-development project. Its total energy requirement is 70 percent of the local norm, and its owners carefully cultivated a stable of green-minded, sustainably bent retailers to fill the new stores they built.

Thus did the husband-and-wife team of Ryan Rivard and Camilla Sherret (formerly of Janice Beaton Fine Cheese) come to win the lease on a second-storey restaurant space over any number of deep-pocketed corporate chains. And with that lease came possibly Banff's best patio

PHOTO BY ASHLEY BRISTOWE

THIRTY

Parry's exquisite smoked-tomato ketchup and banana-curry mustard, his peach-and-bourbon jam and house-smoked duck breast. And then, last March, Parry hauled those hog joints out of the fridge and slathered them in ungodly amounts of kosher salt, and by April they were hanging in their cheesecloth cocoons from hooks in the downstairs fridge. (Sixty degrees Fahrenheit is apparently ideal for prosciutto-curing, but Parry had to improvise a bit.)

And here, nearly a year later, is the finished product. A pile of delicate ham on a cutting board, Parry almost apologizing because it's a bit

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moist—owing to the cooler curing temperature, he reckons—and then fixing me with a look that seems to say, "You sure about this?" I'm not, actually, but I want to be. Surely—I say this to Parry, actually—surely rural Italy would be littered with corpses if it was that easy to screw up?

We both note, again, the meat's gorgeous marbling and healthy red-pink hue, the sharp aroma of a well-cured ham. Finally, with offhand certainty, he scoops a piece into his mouth. I wait a moment and then do the same. It is tender, almost meltingly so, with a mellow, buttery flavour bearing only the right traces of those sharp tones in its bouquet. It's swooningly good, is what it is, and even as we're trading jokes about how long it takes for botulism to lay you flat, I'm tearing off a second little piece and then a third and then just shovelling the stuff in. Who knows when I'll have another chance to try naturally cured prosciutto fresh from the hook?

It's an experiment, and Parry wonders if his prosciutto will make it to the menu at all—maybe, he says, cubed up in a soup or sliced atop a pizza. So just an experiment, but so is all of it—from the ultra-green construction of the Courtyard to the Rocky Mountain Comfort Food to the prosciutto itself. And you know what? It's a successful one. Give me one Bison Mountain Bistro over any dozen run-of-the-mill bar & grills. Give me one quiet afternoon nosing on Grant Parry's prosciutto over a thousand supermarket glazed hams. Greatness is the abode of daredevils and pioneers. And so, for the moment, is greenness. And it's a delectable place to be. **S**