

DINING OUT

CHRISTINE ROGEL

Emigrant Peak rises behind Chico's main lodge.



Chico Hot Springs

At this landmark spa and resort, historic doesn't mean stagnant

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LYNN DONALDSON

I'D IMAGINE THAT FEW *Big Sky Journal* readers need an introduction to Chico Hot Springs, the historic property tucked into a seam of Paradise Valley in Montana, and situated near the base of Emigrant Peak.

It's likely that many of you have splashed around in the geothermal springs, shared a memorable meal complete with a flaming orange dessert in the dining room, danced the two-step to a live band on a weekend, or watched a couple exchange vows on the lawn under an expansive Montana sky. Maybe the more adventurous have hiked the 10,900-foot summit of Emigrant Peak, or ridden horses or a dog-sled through a silent winter landscape. Maybe you've honeymooned in a romantic cabin, slept in the caboose, or explored the beehives and blooming garden during the summer.



LEFT: It's been said that Chico has the "Best Meal in Montana." The new owners, Colin and Seabring Davis, plan to carry on that legacy. **BELOW:** Another private dining option at Chico is in the transformed horse barn, where guests are brought to dinner by horse-drawn carriage and served elevated cowboy classics.

Chico is, after all, a Montana tradition. As one of the state's oldest operating businesses, it seems that all the clichés ring true here: This is authentic Montana, where lasting memories are made. And there's something for everyone at Chico, mixing such amenities as upscale dining and a spa, with a poolside grille and horseshoes on the lawn.

Chico opened as a family-owned establishment and has remained so for nearly 120 years. Purchased by the Davis family in 2015, proprietors Colin and Seabring (the former editor in chief of *Big Sky Journal*) continue a legacy of hospitality that began long ago. They're refining the experience, but keeping things pretty much the same, too. "It doesn't really belong to me, we're just caretakers," Colin says. "There are so many people in Montana that have their own history associated with the resort."

The property opened in 1900 as a modest boarding house for gold miners prospecting in nearby Emigrant Gulch. Owners Bill and Percie Knowles offered a hot spring plunge for 10 cents and a week's boarding for \$6. The Chico Warm Spring Hotel quickly became a popular destination for travelers en route to Yellowstone National Park from Livingston on the





Northern Pacific Railroad. They traveled to Chico by horse and carriage from the Emigrant train stop 3 miles away.

Over the decades, as owners have come and gone, Chico has changed identities, serving as a hospital, health spa, church camp, guest ranch, bed and breakfast, boutique hotel, roadhouse, retreat center, and romantic inn. Over time, it fell into disrepair, and it wasn't until 1973, when the property was purchased by Mike and Eve Art, that Chico was restored and established as a destination resort and spa. The Art family also opened the dining room with chef Larry Edwards, earning Chico's tagline as "The Best Meal in Montana," during



their more than 40 years of ownership.

Colin first discovered Chico in the early '70s, when he was working in the hospitality industry in Bozeman. "The first time I went there, it appealed to me as a person," he says, adding that he grew to know the Arts. In 1995, Seabring — who, that same year, became a waitress in Chico's dining room — called Colin with the news that the Arts were



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A horse-drawn carriage ride through a winter wonderland makes for a memorable Chico experience.

- Chico's hot spring is refilled with fresh water every morning and is open until 11 p.m. nightly.
- In the inviting dining room in the main lodge, guests are served their favorite Chico classics, some of which have been on the menu since the 1970s.

hiring a general manager. “To me, it was like a dream job,” Colin says. Within a few years, the Arts made him a partner and Colin fostered a business culture that focused on character, values, service, and families. He worked with the Arts until he purchased the property three years ago. “Change is inevitable,” Colin says, “but we’re only doing it if we can make Chico more Chico.”

“Historic doesn’t mean stagnant — we remember our roots, but aren’t afraid to branch out in order to meet the demands of guests,” adds Seabring.

The latest example of this is the addition of the Tasting Room, a small, private dining room that seats up to six people (not to be confused with Chico’s Wine Cellar, which is another private dining area in a separate building). Surrounded by distinguished labels from some of the most well-respected wine regions in the world, diners enjoy homemade preparations by Executive Chef David Wells, who humbly reminds them that food is a culinary art. Guests choose a seven- or 12-course tasting menu with a wine pairing. A sample of course number three: Georges Banks Scallops, featuring a scallop in a royal purple broth, made with butterfly pea flower and lemongrass. It’s



served kobosu-style (the broth is poured over), with a topping of ginger “caviar,” a delicate imitation that Wells makes by hand, and paired with a Condrieu La Doriane from the E. Guigal winery in France. For course 10: Takamori “Drunken” Wagyu Strip Loin, with matsutake mushrooms, potato puree, baby kale, and whiskey barrel-aged shoyu, paired with a 1999 Sassicaia.

“People don’t expect to find this level of hospitality all the way out here,” says Colin, who designed the wine list to appeal to a range of visitors. Chico’s cellar includes a collection of more than 3,000 bottles, including hard-to-find

vintages and classic wines from France, Italy, Portugal, California, and the Northwest.

Much of the produce used in Chico’s recipes is grown on premise and is watered by the hot springs, which is sulphur- and chlorine-free. The microclimate created by the spring extends Chico’s growing season from May to late October, and during the winter months, Wells coordinates with head gardener Jeannie Duran on what to plant. The resort also focuses on sustainability and keeping it local, working as much as possible with Montana ranches and farms. “We will butcher a

Pistachio-Crusted Rack of Lamb

From *The Western Kitchen: Seasonal Recipes from Montana’s Chico Hot Springs Resort* written by Seabring Davis, with photography by Lynn Donaldson

SERVES 4 TO 8

INGREDIENTS

2 tablespoons canola oil
 1½ -pound rack of lamb
 ½ cup panko bread crumbs
 ½ cup chopped pistachios
 ½ teaspoon chopped fresh rosemary
 2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley
 1 tablespoon chopped fresh sage
 1 tablespoon fresh thyme
 2 tablespoons Dijon mustard

INSTRUCTIONS

In a cast-iron skillet or heavy-bottomed pan with heated canola oil, sear the lamb and then let it cool. Combine panko and pistachios with herbs. Rub lamb with mustard, then dip it into pistachio-panko mixture, pressing on all sides to form a crust. Bake at 375 for 30 to 40 minutes, depending on the size of the rack, for medium temperature. Remove from the oven and let the rack rest on a cutting board for 10 minutes to seal in the cooking juices. Slice and serve with your choice of savory sides.





OPPOSITE: Owner Colin Davis purchased the resort in 2015. Here, he enjoys conversation shared over wine in Chico's latest addition, the Tasting Room. **ABOVE:** In the Tasting Room, the table is set and ready for service. For this dining experience, Executive Chef David Wells dreams up and creates an assortment of exceptional small plates.

whole cow and use every part of it," Colins says, adding that if it comes from the sea, it's flown in weekly.

And just as the Davises are hospitable hosts, they're also willing to share their secrets. Seabring's latest cookbook, *The Western Kitchen: Seasonal Recipes from Montana's Chico Hot Springs Resort*, imparts the techniques and ingredients for making a Chico meal at home, from the signature Beef Wellington and Pine Nut Crusted Halibut, to other specials they've served over the years.

The history at Chico creates a charm and authenticity that cannot be manufactured, and with careful owners like the Davis family, this historic property will last long into the future, serving as a gathering place for residents of Montana and visitors from around the world. ▲

Christine Rogel is managing editor of Big Sky Journal and editor in chief of Western Art & Architecture.

Lynn Donaldson shoots regularly for National Geographic, National Geographic Traveler, Travel & Leisure, Sunset, and The New York Times. She is founder and editor of the Montana food and travel blog The Last Best Plates. Donaldson lives outside of Livingston with her husband and three children.

AD TK