

DISCREET PALETTE—*Kay Bjork*

UNION GRILLE RESTAURANT



In the Heart of the Upper Missouri and Lewis and Clark Country Another Place of Discovery

When you consider the Grand Union Hotel's rather remote location nearly 40 miles outside of Great Falls, in a place where big sky, endless empty prairie, and car-less roads dominate, you would not expect to find

a restaurant that serves unusual dishes such as a portabella mushroom and Amaltheia chevre wonton, a seafood medley served over black truffle pasta, a spice buffalo NY served with smoked organic potatoes and a tomatillo-pepper relish complemented by a selection of ten micro-brews on tap and an eclectic wine list.

The Union Grille Restaurant at the Grand Union Hotel in Fort Benton hails some of the best dining in the state. This historic 1882 restaurant on the banks of the Upper Missouri offers Montana Regional cuisine using fresh ingredients from

local and organic farms and fresh breads and desserts from their own kitchen.

Executive Chef Nick Mehmke is a fifth generation Montana whose professional experience outside of Montana combined with his Montana roots insure the integrity of this unique Montana dining experience.

Mehmke showed an early interest in cooking. It felt like a natural progression for a farm kid—grow food and then learn how to cook it. When he was still in high school he worked at Lily's Oriental Emporium in Great Falls while juggling work on the farm and his schoolwork. He washed dishes, did prep work, "and I fried a lot of chicken," Nick remembers with a laugh. He notes that working up from the bottom ranks gave him a humble approach to the kitchen and an understanding and empathy in the business that is valuable to him now as a manager and executive chef.

After high school Nick couldn't wait to get away. After one semester at the University of Montana in Missoula, Nick cast his vote for cooking and attended Western Culinary

portabella mushroom and Amaltheia chevre wonton



📷 Courtesy of The Grand Union Hotel

spice buffalo NY served with smoked organic potatoes



📷 Courtesy of The Grand Union Hotel

Institute in Portland, Oregon. The next few years he worked at a variety of fine dining restaurants adding to the range of his cooking knowledge and experience including the Rainbow Ranch Lodge in Big Sky and the Gallatin River Lodge in Belgrade. Seasonal breaks allowed him to train under the tutelage of distinguished chefs including Chef Thomas Donohoe who taught him a flavorful style of cooking that blended locally and responsibly grown products with unique culinary influences and Thomas Keller, of the French Laundry in Yountville, CA who is considered one of the best chefs in America.

On a whim Nick decided to honeymoon at the Grand Union Hotel with his new wife Kristie. Mehmke remembers, "I was so impressed with the hotel and the ambiance that I left my name with our server." The farm kid who couldn't wait to get away was ready to come back.

He couldn't shake his interest in this special place; so less than two weeks later he called owner Cheryl Gagnon and asked if she needed a chef. As luck would have it, she had just hired a chef the day before, but four months later Cheryl called him with an opening. In November 2006 Nick came home to north central Montana and began work as executive chef at the Union Grille Restaurant.

Mehmke brought his own style and experiences to the Grand Union punctuated by his youthful energy and enthusiasm. He is committed to providing a fine dining experience marked with only the finest and freshest ingredients.

His connection to the land has partnered him with local farmers and ranchers who share his commitment to farming in a conscientious manner. More than half of his produce in the summer is locally provided. "I strive to use the resources around me to highlight the local area."

This includes Big Sandy organic farmers who provide produce to the restaurant. This not only showcases and supports local growers, but ensures the freshness of the products used. Mehmke also buys Montana grown buffalo, lamb, ducks, and chickens whenever available. He is excited about the amazing resources available in his own backyard. Local farmer Bob Quinn has been growing 42 different Heirloom potatoes and organic squash and Mehmke says Charlie Sipler grows "unusual, fun stuff" such as arugula, herbs, French Frog Leg shallots and 16 varieties of Heirloom tomatoes. He also gets honey and beef from the Mehmke family farm where they have a natural approach to farming.

Menus are changed seasonally and planned around harvest to utilize his purveyors and ensure the freshness of the ingredients used. Described as Montana regional cuisine, Mehmke says it reflects his varied experiences in cooking. He says, "French and Asian flavors and techniques shine through and I also like to play with Caribbean, Moroccan, and Italian."

He wants dining to be a bit of an adventure for his clients and searches for unique wines to pair with the food including international wines from France, Spain, Australia and Argentina.

Mehmke is excited that he now can get organic, fresh-milled flour just four blocks away. The newly built Montana Flour and Grain Mill provides him with a variety of fresh-milled organic grains including rye, wheat and a low gluten grain Kamut used in their pastas. Nick notes that they make their breads daily, "You can't beat freshly milled flour."

If the baked goods at the Union Grille taste like mom's it's because they are—Mehmke hires local cooks to bake goodies such as scones, muffins, and sweet rolls for the continental breakfast served hotel guests.

This homey approach merges into the elegant setting of the grand old hotel to create an atmosphere of fine dining while still making it comfortable and relaxing for guests. Guests might come straight off a day on the river or in a wedding gown and tuxedo. The hotel and restaurant have become a popular place for special occasions, meetings, and vacations.

It is the artful design of owner Cheryl Gagnon that so successfully blended elegance and comfort throughout the hotel—something she calls "Cowboy Victorian."

Mehmke creates a dining experience that is worthy of the magnificent historic hotel and its location perched on the banks of the Upper Missouri under a canopy of gigantic cottonwoods. Its location off the beaten path only adds to its charm.

The restaurant is both inviting and commanding with its soaring tin ceiling, 14-foot windows, white linen table cloths, fresh flowers, historic furnishings, and views of the river. During the summer guests can sit outside on the riverside patio just feet from the glistening Missouri.

Friendly and professional wait staff provides a high level of service and are knowledgeable about the food and its preparation. Their enthusiasm is genuine because they all share a love and pride for the Grand Union Hotel. Mehmke says, "They know they are doing something special." ❧

The Union Grille is open daily in the summer for evening dining from 5 to 9 p.m. During the winter they are open Wednesday through Sunday from 5 to 9 p.m.


For more information call 406-622-1882; Toll Free: 1-888-838-1882 or visit their website: www.grandunionhotel.com




~A love for words and pictures led Kay Bjork to a career as a feature writer and photographer for numerous newspapers and magazines. Her home and family on Swan Lake have been the subject of many of her stories and photographs about their outdoor adventures including skating, skiing and hiking.

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 Courtesy of The Grand Union Hotel



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GRAND UNION HOTEL



*The Grand Union Hotel
invites you to our
Halloween Masquerade Ball
as we celebrate the
Grand Finale of our 125th Anniversary*

October 31, 2008 from 7:30 pm until 12:30 am

Enjoy Appetizers and Dancing throughout the evening with masked identities revealed at midnight.

Prizes for the best mask and costume. Room packages available.

**Fort Benton, MT | 406.622.1882
www.grandunionhotel.com**



ELABORATE WINE TASTINGS UNCOMMONLY GOOD AT GRAND UNION HOTEL



By Renata Birkenbuel

Celebrating its sixth year at the Grand Union Hotel in historic Fort Benton, an elegant wine tasting paired with carefully chosen organic, sustainable foods from Montana soil proved to be a local and regional success. The annual event, "Montana Earthly Elegance," drew a packed house, much to the delight of Grand Union owner and hostess Cheryl Gagnon. The Union Grille Restaurant seats 68, and on a crisp, cloudless Spring week night, it's filled to capacity.

"This is a good crowd," beams Gagnon as she surveys her dining room. She and husband Jim Gagnon, both Chester, Montana, natives, opened the aptly named Grand Union in 1999 following two years' extensive renovation. The majestic old historic hotel originally attracted a wide range of true-blue Old West characters in 1882, when Fort Benton was a bustling hub of Upper Missouri River travel. Seven years before Montana became a state, the Grand Union saw its share of steamboat captains, cowboys, outlaws, and gunslingers pass through its doors.

Head Chef Nick Mehmke, who's worked at the Grand Union for nearly two years, was meticulous in pairing his six-course meal with separate fine wines introduced by wine consultant Kevin Hamlin of George's Distributing in Helena. Wines included a Chardonnay from Sonoma, California, which complemented the Lobster Succotash starter; Cuevas de Castilla, a Spanish white matched with a Flathead Whitefish; Mapema, an Argentina red paired with Oven Roasted Squab (young pigeon) and vegetables; and a Columbia Valley (Washington) Syrah coupled with Blackened Montana Buffalo Ribeye, the melt-in-your-mouth main course. Huckleberry Sorbet served as a palate cleanser, and dessert was Local Aged Honey and Bittersweet Chocolate Gelato with a Toasted Almond Tuile (cookie). Longtime organic farmer Bob Quinn of Big Sandy provided the fresh, locally grown vegetables. Best of all, the featured wines are available at Vintage Sellers in Great Falls. *AM*