

IN THE BACKWOODS OF ALASKA,  
TWO FOOD LOVERS F

# going wild



THIS PAGE: HOLLY AND JOHN HAD THIS VIEW OF REDOUBT BAY LODGE FROM THEIR HILLSIDE CABIN. OPPOSITE: THE AUTHORS FLEW IN ON A DEHAVILLAND BEAVER FLOATPLANE FROM THE LAKE HOOD SEAPLANE BASE AT ANCHORAGE INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT.

# S FIND ADVENTURE—AND GOURMET DINING

by HOLLY RUDIN-BRASCHI  
AND JOHN C. BRASCHI

photography by  
WILLIAM MEPPEN

**Celebrating** our 20th wedding anniversary called for something entirely out of character. No basking on a restful Hawaiian beach for us this year. John suggested a trip to the Alaskan wilderness complete with fishing, hiking, boating, and loads of wildlife. We agreed that typical camp fare just wouldn't do for such an important milestone: We wanted world-class cuisine in the wilderness. That seemed like a tall order until Holly discovered Within the Wild Adventure Lodges, a company that combined it all.

Within the Wild provides everything for an Alaskan adventure in style, from the 50-minute seaplane ride out of Anchorage to three squares a day supervised by executive chef Kirsten Dixon, who has cooked at the James Beard House in New York. Kirsten, along with her husband, Carl, owns Within the Wild's three remote lodges, one on a river, one on a lake, and a third in the mountains. Carl, an experienced Alaska guide, directs all of the wilderness activities at the lodges. We didn't even have to worry about wilderness gear. They would supply it all.

We eagerly booked a two-day stay at both of their summer lodges for early June: Riversong Lodge on the Yentna River, renowned as a fisherman's paradise, and Redoubt Bay Lodge, the only privately held property within the 171,500-acre Redoubt Bay critical-status animal habitat. Their higher-elevation Winterlake Lodge was still under snow.





explained. Situated in the center of the 10-acre property, the homey structure has been gradually enlarged to include a professional kitchen, a dining room carpeted with oriental rugs, a bar, and a fuchsia-filled greenhouse and meeting room.

With less than an hour to spare before dinner, we inspected our spruce-log guest cabin, one of 10 surrounding the main lodge. It was luxurious in every way, including a private bathroom. The only indication that we were “roughing it” was a propane camp lantern on the table.

Dinner that first night exceeded our expectations. One bite of the lamb shanks over peppery spaetzle made it apparent that Kirsten had trained



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: RASPBERRY SYRUP SWEETENS THIS LEMONADE; THE AUTHORS, JOHN AND HOLLY, AT RIVERSONG LODGE; A QUIET EVENING ON THE BIG RIVER LAKES; FISHER FALLS. OPPOSITE: AN EDIBLE FLORAL DESIGN GIVES POTTED HAM A FRENCH FLAIR; HOLLY LEARNS TO SPIN-CAST LIKE A PRO.

DAYS 1 AND 2  
**riversong**  
 lodge

AS OUR SEAPLANE HEADED northwest away from Anchorage’s Lake Hood Seaplane Base toward Riversong Lodge, we realized that flying at a lower altitude and a slower speed

than a commercial jet gave us a unique overview of our destination. Before us stretched a vast glacial valley framed by the distant Alaska Range, each jagged snow-capped peak glittering in the crystalline sky. Directly below us, a mother moose and calf followed a visible trail among the green pastures, amber bogs, and dense forests of the Upper Susitna River Valley.

After a soft landing on the Yentna River, we taxied across the strong, muddy current to the Riversong dock, where Kirsten waved a friendly welcome. As the staff unloaded our luggage, she walked us up the steep riverbank past vivid flower beds to the rustic main lodge. “Carl and I hand-built the original single-room house in 1983 from local logs,” she

with the likes of Jacques Pépin and Charlie Trotter. But the real wonder is Kirsten's talent for creating masterpiece meals in the Alaskan bush with ingredients grown in the lodge gardens, from local farms, or caught in the wild.

The next morning, Ken, the head fishing guide, took us to Indian Creek in a high-speed boat for a crash course in fishing. Protected by hip waders, we learned to spin-cast standing in knee-deep water on the grassy shoreline. Each time we snagged or caught a fish, it was like winning a jackpot. Undeniably hooked, we fished at different locations throughout the day then returned to the lodge for dinner. Grilled salmon smothered in piquant barbecue sauce and served with a ruby-red Pinot Noir was our prelude to late "night" casting on Lake Creek. Alaska's nearly round-the-clock light in summer allowed us to fish until 11 P.M., when our licenses expired.

DAYS 3 AND 4

## redoubt bay lodge

FROM THE AIR, REDOUBT BAY Lodge looks like a small dot on the massive volcanic mountains that surround the northwestern and southern shores of the Big River Lakes. Approaching the lodge over an eastern expanse of ponds and bogs, the seaplane roared, the sound scattering a flock of trumpeter swans floating nearby.

Early the next morning, we unashamedly licked the crumbs of Kirsten's Blueberry Breakfast Cake off our fingers as her husband motored us by boat to a bear-watching spot. Experiencing the abundant wildlife from Carl's unique perspective as a guide and environmentalist was the most exciting part of our trip. Under the watchful eyes of bald eagles soaring overhead, he took us to the best

wildlife viewing areas on the Big River Lakes. Endangered tule geese glided by as we bounced our way across a flower-studded bog. We saw scores of hungry black and brown bear fishing enormous schools of sockeye salmon as the fish desperately climbed rocky waterfalls to spawn. While hiking a bear trail along a creek, Carl showed us signs of otter and moose.

A lunch of creamy fromage blanc and potted ham pâté washed down with berry lemonade fortified us for an afternoon of canoeing and more animal watching. During our peaceful paddle trip, an ermine skittering along the shore captured our attention. We spied a beaver building a home while a harbor seal swam by to inspect.

Fortunately, although our time in remote Alaska ended the next morning, we didn't leave without the secrets to a few of Kirsten's unforgettable meals. We share them with you on the next few pages.

### POTTED HAM

PREP TIME: 30 minutes, plus at least 4 hours chilling time

NOTES: A bottle of Sancerre makes a good accompaniment.

MAKES: 4 ramekins (1 lb. total)

- 5 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 cup chopped yellow onion
- 1 pound cooked ham, cubed
- ½ teaspoon allspice
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground pepper
- 2 tablespoons fresh thyme leaves
- 4 thin, round slices carrot
- 2 to 4 chive stems
- Butter lettuce leaves (optional)
- Focaccia or crusty baguette

1. In a 6- to 8-inch pan, melt the butter. Add the onion and sauté slowly over medium-low heat until the onion is golden and tender, about 10 minutes.



2. Meanwhile, in a food processor fitted with the metal blade, process the ham, all-spice, pepper, and thyme until finely chopped. When the onion is done, add it to the ham and process until smooth.

3. Line 4 flat-bottomed ramekins (4 oz. size) with plastic wrap; leave enough excess wrap hanging over the sides to cover the top when filled.

4. Cut each carrot slice into several small wedges. Arrange as flower petals on the bottom of each ramekin. Cut chives to look like the stems and leaves of the flowers. Make sure the arrangement is pressed against the plastic wrap.

5. Fill each ramekin with equal amounts of the ham mixture, then press gently with a spoon and smooth off the top. Cover with the excess plastic wrap and refrigerate until chilled, at least 4 hours or up to 4 days.

6. To serve, lift the excess plastic wrap covering the ham mixture, then invert each ramekin onto a small plate lined with butter lettuce leaves, if desired. Carefully remove the plastic wrap so you don't disturb the flower decoration. Serve with fromage blanc (recipe follows) for spreading on focaccia.

Per tablespoon: 87 cal., 64% (55 cal.) from fat; 6.6 g protein; 6.2 g fat (3 g sat.); 1.1 g carbo (0.2 g fiber); 427 mg sodium; 26 mg chol.

**WILDLY DELICIOUS  
FROMAGE BLANC**

PREP TIME: 10 minutes, plus at least 1 day chilling time  
MAKES: 1½ cups

- 2 cups large curd cottage cheese
- ½ cup plain yogurt
- 2 tablespoons chopped Italian parsley
- 2 tablespoons chopped chives
- 1 teaspoon chopped tarragon
- Freshly ground pepper
- Focaccia or crusty baguette

1. In a food processor fitted with the metal chopping blade, mix cottage cheese and yogurt until smooth. Add parsley, chives, tarragon, and pepper, then pulse to combine.

2. Line a strainer with a double layer of cheesecloth and place strainer over a bowl. Scrape cheese mixture into strainer and cover cheese mixture with excess cheesecloth. Refrigerate until next day or up to 3 days, until most of the moisture has drained away. When ready to serve, scrape mixture into a decorative serving bowl and offer for spreading on slices of fresh focaccia or crusty baguette.

Per tablespoon: 21 cal., 41% (8 cal.) from fat; 2.3 g protein; 0.9 g fat (0.6 g sat.); 0.7 g carbo (0 g fiber); 73 mg sodium; 3 mg chol.



**GOOD MORNING  
BLUEBERRY  
BREAKFAST CAKE**

“This recipe is my answer to vacation fast food,” says Kirsten. “This is what we serve our guests who willingly forsake a leisurely breakfast for a spectacular morning photo opportunity: grizzly bears fishing for their salmon brunch.”

PREP AND COOK TIME: About 45 minutes

NOTES: After cake is cooled and cut into individual servings, it can be frozen in an airtight container for up to 2 months

MAKES: 16 (2-inch square) servings

- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 1 cup Irish oats
- 1 cup brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 2 teaspoons baking soda
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ⅔ cup buttermilk
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 2 large egg whites

- 1 Granny Smith apple, peeled, cored, and shredded
- ½ cup dried cranberries
- ½ cup coarsely chopped cashews
- ½ cup fresh blueberries

1. Preheat oven to 375° F. Oil an 8-inch-square baking pan.

2. In a large mixing bowl, combine flour, oats, brown sugar, cinnamon, baking soda, and salt. Stir in buttermilk, oil, and egg whites, mixing well.

3. Stir in apple, cranberries, and nuts until evenly distributed. With a large spatula, gently fold in blueberries.

4. Using a spatula, spread batter evenly in the oiled baking pan. Bake for 30 to 40 minutes or until browned and firm in the center. Cool to room temperature on a wire rack before cutting into bars.

Per serving: 175 cal., 27% (48 cal.) from fat; 3 g protein; 5.4 g fat (0.9 g sat.); 29 g carbo (1.3 g fiber); 254 mg sodium; 0.4 mg chol.

**PEPPERY MAPLE SYRUP  
BACON**

PREP AND COOK TIME:  
25 minutes  
MAKES: 4 servings

- 1 pound good quality thickly-sliced bacon
- Coarsely ground black pepper
- ¼ cup maple syrup

1. Preheat oven to 400° F. Line a 12- by 17-inch nonstick baking sheet with parchment paper. Separate bacon slices and lay them on the baking sheet. Sprinkle both sides of the bacon with pepper.

2. In a small bowl, mix maple syrup with 1 teaspoon water. Brush syrup mixture onto bacon with a pastry brush. Bake in preheated oven until bacon is crisp and golden, about 15

minutes. Drain bacon on paper towels, then serve immediately. Per serving: 207 cal., 69% (142 cal.) from fat; 9 g protein; 16 g fat (5.6 g sat.); 6.9 g carbo (0 g fiber); 721 mg sodium; 22.5 mg chol.

**RIVERSONG LODGE  
PERFECT BBQ SALMON**

“We have two large old 55-gallon drums outside at the lodge that have served as our

barbecues forever,” explains Kirsten. “Carl cut the barrels in half and put hinges on one half for lids. We were in business! We have a barbecue every Saturday and love cooking outside alongside the river.”

PREP AND COOK TIME: About 25 minutes, plus 30 minutes for the salmon to absorb the flavor of the spices  
MAKES: 8 servings

- 2 pounds skin-on salmon fillet, cut into 8 individual pieces
- 1 teaspoon lemon peel
- 1 teaspoon minced onion
- 1 teaspoon ground fennel
- 1 teaspoon medium-ground black pepper
- ½ teaspoon ground cardamom
- ¾ cup Riversong Lodge BBQ Sauce (see recipe on page 44)
- Mixed salad greens

1. Using tweezers, remove any bones from the salmon. In a small bowl, combine lemon peel, onion, fennel, pepper, and cardamom. Rub lemon peel mixture onto the flesh of the salmon with your fingertips (do not smear onto skin); let spices soak in for 30 minutes before grilling.

2. Smear salmon pieces with the BBQ sauce and place, flesh side down, on a grill over a solid bed of hot coals or medium-high heat on a gas grill (you can hold your hand at grill level only 3 to 4 seconds). Grill 5 minutes without disturbing to allow distinct grill marks to form.

3. Using two spatulas for control, carefully turn the salmon pieces over. Baste flesh with additional BBQ sauce, if desired. Cover grill and cook an additional 5 to 7 minutes or until the internal temperature is between 135° and 140°.

4. Meanwhile, place a portion of mixed salad greens on each of 8 dinner plates. When salmon is done, gently slide a spatula between the flesh and the skin of each piece, then lift piece to a plate (skin will remain on the

OPPOSITE, TOP TO BOTTOM: A BEAR-WATCHERS' BREAKFAST OF BLUEBERRY CAKE AND SPICY-SWEET BACON; CHEF KIRSTEN AND HER HUSBAND, CARL; A GRAZING GRIZZLY BEAR; THE MAIN LODGE AT RIVERSONG. THIS PAGE, SERVE BARBECUED SALMON OVER WILD GREENS WITH A GLASS OF PINOT NOIR.





ABOVE: WILDFLOWERS BLOOM ON A RIVER BOG. BELOW: FRESHLY CAUGHT SOCKEYE SALMON; A SEAPLANE TAKES OFF AT REDOUBT BAY.

grill; remove and discard later).  
Serve immediately.

Per serving: 245 cal., 54% (131 cal.)  
from fat; 20.7 g protein; 14.6 g fat (3.5 g  
sat.); 6.8 g carbo (0.4 g fiber); 153 mg  
sodium; 65 mg chol.

### RIVERSONG LODGE BBQ SAUCE

PREP AND COOK TIME: About 1  
hour

MAKES: 1½ cups

- 2 tablespoons plus 1½  
teaspoons butter
- ½ cup finely chopped onion
- 1 teaspoon minced garlic
- ½ cup tomato purée
- ½ cup apple cider vinegar
- 2 tablespoons fresh lemon  
juice
- ½ teaspoon grated orange  
peel
- ¼ cup Worcestershire
- ¼ cup firmly packed  
brown sugar
- 2 tablespoons canola oil

- ¼ cup pineapple juice
- 2 tablespoons minced  
Italian parsley



1. Melt butter in a 4- to 6-quart pan over medium heat. Add onion; reduce heat to medium-low. Sauté about 10 minutes, then add garlic. Continue to sauté until onion is soft and golden, about 5 minutes more.
2. Add tomato purée, vinegar, lemon juice, orange peel, Worcestershire, brown sugar, and canola oil; reduce heat to low. Simmer for about 20 minutes.
3. Add pineapple juice and parsley, then simmer an additional 20 minutes. If making ahead, refrigerate in an airtight container up to 1 week or freeze up to 2 months.

Per tablespoon: 38 cal., 53% (21 cal.)  
from fat; 0.3 g protein; 2.3 g fat (0.8 g  
sat.); 4.3 g carbo (0.2 g fiber); 62 mg  
sodium; 3.2 mg chol.

### WILDBERRY LEMONADE

PREP AND COOK TIME: About 20  
minutes, plus 1 hour cooling  
time for simple syrup

MAKES: 4 to 6 servings

- 1 cup sugar
- 2 cups fresh lemon juice
- 2 cups still spring water
- ¼ cup raspberry-flavor  
syrup
- 2 cups carbonated (soda)  
water
- Ice
- Fresh mint sprigs

1. In a 1½- to 2-quart pan over medium heat, combine sugar and ½ cup tap water. Stir until sugar is dissolved. Bring mixture to a boil, then reduce heat and simmer for about 5 minutes. Remove from heat and let simple syrup cool to room temperature, about 1 hour.
2. Pour syrup into a 2- to 3-quart pitcher. Stir in lemon juice and spring water. Add raspberry syrup. Refrigerate up to 2 days.
3. Just before serving, stir in carbonated water. Serve over ice in chilled glasses; garnish with a sprig of fresh mint.

Per serving: 164 cal., 0% (0 cal.) from fat;  
0 g protein; 0 g fat (0 g sat.); 42 g carbo  
(0 g fiber); 17 mg sodium; 0 mg chol.

# planning a trip

HERE ARE OUR SUGGESTIONS FOR CREATING AN ALASKAN HOLIDAY THAT WILL TEMPT YOUR PALATE AND BE THE ADVENTURE OF A LIFETIME:

The best time for fishing and wildlife adventures like ours is from June to September, when the temperature averages between 60 and 75 degrees.

Alaska Airlines flies frequently to Anchorage from most major West Coast cities; call (800) 252-7522 or visit [www.alaskaair.com](http://www.alaskaair.com) for schedules and prices. Travel by air within the state is mostly by seaplane; Rust's Flying Seaplane Service (800/544-2299 or [www.flyrusts.com](http://www.flyrusts.com)) took us from Anchorage to Riversong Lodge, and then from there to Redoubt Bay Lodge. They also offer flight-seeing tours.

Each of Within the Wild's three lodges is in south central Alaska, less than an hour from Anchorage by seaplane. To contact Within the Wild, call (907) 274-2710 or visit [www.withinthewild.com](http://www.withinthewild.com).

After returning from the lodges, we spent six additional days exploring Anchorage and nearby scenic areas. We traveled by boat to Prince William Sound with Honey Charters (907/278-2493 or [www.honeycharters.com](http://www.honeycharters.com)) for a kayaking trip among the glaciers organized by North Star Adventures (800/258-8434 or [www.adventuretrip.com](http://www.adventuretrip.com)). Next, we drove to Seward through the breathtaking mountains of the Kenai Peninsula and enjoyed an unforgettable boat tour of the scenic Kenai Fjords National Park (contact Kenai Fjords Tours at 800/468-8068 or [www.kenaifjords.com](http://www.kenaifjords.com)).

Along the way, we stayed at the Alyeska Prince Hotel (800/880-3880 or [www.alyeskaresort.com](http://www.alyeskaresort.com)) in Girdwood, 40 miles south of Anchorage. Tucked amid the Chugach Mountains, it's an excellent starting point for hiking, biking, fishing, and kayaking in the area near Prince William Sound. We thoroughly enjoyed dinner at the resort's Seven Glaciers Restaurant, which has a spectacular view of, you guessed it, seven glaciers. Our base in the Kenai Fjords area was the Seward Windsong Lodge (888/959-9590 or [www.sewardwindsong.com](http://www.sewardwindsong.com)), just two miles north of the Seward Small Boat Harbor in the panoramic Resurrection River Valley.

The Anchorage Convention and Visitors Bureau had everything we needed to plan a trip to the area we visited. Check them out at [www.anchorage.net](http://www.anchorage.net) or call (800) 478-1255.