



The MacKenzie River Powerhouses

by *Stephanie Gandulla*
Photos by *Michael Blevins*
& *Stephanie Gandulla*

Montana. The Big Sky state invokes images of snowcapped mountains, lush valleys, roaring rivers, and.....pizza? Well, in the early nineties, that's exactly what the founders of MacKenzie River Pizza Company saw when they chose Bozeman as the perfect spot for their new concept restaurant. Christin Cooper and Mark Tache had been looking for a location that suited their fresh idea of a restaurant that blurred the line between work and play while offering high quality food in an engaging environment. With partner Don MacKenzie, the founding team hit on exactly what it would take to make gourmet pizza work in a fast-growing Montana town.



No strangers to the West, Christin hails from Idaho and Mark from Colorado; they saw southwest Montana as the perfect backdrop for an establishment that celebrates a passion for the outdoor lifestyle. The MRPCo. philosophy is: "Life is short. Enjoy what you do, and do it well." This credo pervades the attitude of the staff and management and results in a popular and positive atmosphere.

MacKenzie River Pizza Company opened its first store in 1993 in the heart of downtown Bozeman. Beginning as a counter-service operation, MRPCo. was immediately busy. That first year, as the initial management and staff learned from triumphs and mistakes, MRPCo. evolved into a full-service venue. After just less than two years, MRPCo. expanded to Missoula and over the past twelve years has opened eleven stores throughout Montana, with the twelfth slated to open in Spring of 2006 in the historical mining city of Butte.

Two additional concepts have grown from the original MRPCo. -- the Roadhouse, a BBQ-steakhouse on the outskirts of Bozeman, and the Montana Ale Works, a restaurant and full bar in downtown Bozeman.

Christin and Mark are active owners, along with a third partner Steve Shuel. Steve brings to the mix a background in advertising and marketing that contrasts well with the other two founders' backgrounds in competitive ski racing.

Christin Cooper spent eight years as a member of the U.S. Ski Team and World Cup Team and is a two time Olympian in the 1980 and '84 Games. After a stellar ski racing career, she moved into sports media, excelling as a respected writer and an expert broadcast analyst for CBS and NBC. She was inducted into the U.S. Ski Hall of Fame in 1984, and for her humanitarian work initiating youth sports programs in Sarajevo, was inducted into the World Sports Humanitarian Hall of Fame in 1995.

Mark Tache also spent eight years on the U.S. Ski Team and enjoyed a racing career highlighted by championships across the West and in Austria and Italy. After seven years on the U.S. Pro Ski Tour, Mark turned to coaching and product testing and presently manages the professional surfing career of his two nephews, Bruce and Andy Irons.

After seventeen years in the advertising business, Steve left his multimillion dollar firm in Indianapolis and came to Bozeman with his wife, Kathy, and two sons. His first experience with MRPCo. was the Santa Fe Chicken sandwich. With one bite, he knew he'd found something special. Steve Shuel joined the MacKenzie River team just two years after the Bozeman location opened, and, working with founder Don MacKenzie, helped to open four more stores before buying out MacKenzie's shares.

This successful team brought no behind-the-scenes restaurant experience to the MacKenzie River concept but they did bring a clear vision: "to provide customers with a dining experience that exceeds their expectations." To achieve this lofty goal, the trio felt that an exceptional staff was imperative. As Steve insightfully points out, "You don't survive without customers, but you don't have customers without a great staff."

To help forge a strong crew, Christin and Mark referred back to the invaluable ideals learned from their years in the rigorous world of ski competition. Brought to the highest levels of ski competition through successful mentoring, Christin realizes that, "We have never forgotten what it meant to have people that helped us bring out the best out in ourselves."

And that's exactly what the MRPCo. management team

wants to provide for their staff. A staff that, according to Amy Howell, a manager at the Bozeman location for five years, is "encouraged to be themselves and have fun."

This enthusiasm translates to the customers, who appreciate, Amy continues, "getting a feel for what the server is like as a person."

"The most important question for new hires," Christin asserts, "is, 'what do you do in your free time?'" "[We want to] translate that interest for what they do into work."

Brad Ridgeway, Director of Operations and Senior Regional Manager, feels that the heavy staff training prepares employees for both work and life. Brad, who started with MRPCo. ten years ago as a delivery driver and dishwasher, is confident in the quality of food and atmosphere of each location but feels the "service aspect sets us apart."

"Since the beginning, we've been fortunate with the people we've attracted," Mark, one of the three founders, humbly says. "We're all passionate people both at work and play and we've fostered that in the stores. Everyone is a skier, biker, boater...People have that twinkle in their eye when they come to work."

Not all Montana cities are exactly alike; yet MRPCo.'s expansion is indicative of how they can, as Christin puts it, "tap into people's enthusiasms no matter where you are".

Pete Hendrickson, the very first General Manager, says MRPCo. works to achieve a viable "work-life balance" for the staff and management. Hendrickson remembers working a twelve hour shift and then eagerly heading out to the hills for a four hour mountain bike ride.

In 2000, after thirteen years with MRPCo., Hendrickson transferred his 28 years of restaurant experience to Montana Ale Works, another MRPCo. concept that has become a Bozeman hit.

As stated on their comprehensive web site, "the vibe at MRPCo. is representative of what it means to live and breathe the Montana life." A full page dedicated just to recreation links is indicative of just how much MRPCo. values the Montana outdoor lifestyle.

Even down to decor, MRPCo. prevails in being uniquely Montanan without being cliched. "We wanted to keep the interior design to where the Montanans say, 'This is us,'" Steve says; "yet when the out-of-state folks come in, it epitomizes what they view as the West."

In almost every store, a "MacKenzie" driftboat is suspended upside down from the ceiling, the namesake of the restaurant and of the longest river in Canada. Extra efforts are made to assure that many of the furnishings are handcrafted by local artisans. All of the rustic tables and chairs are constructed by Montana Lodgepole of Bozeman. The maroon and green upholstery, adorned with schools of swimming trout, is supplied by Salzburg Designs, another

Bozeman manufacturer. And the characteristic buffalo skull sconces are all hand carved by local Bearclaw Jack. The striking pastel murals of Montana landscapes are another MRPCo. feature, and were originally painted by founder Don MacKenzie's mother, Emma. They have since been digitally copied to prominent walls in each store.

With the MRPCo. team's effervescent attitude about life and work and the stylishly rustic atmosphere, anyone who walks into any MRPCo. can see that it isn't like any other pizza joint. But what about the food? Ask most locals, and they won't hesitate to tell you their favorite pizza, sandwich, salad or pasta dish. But where do the unique, and sometimes off-the-wall, recipes come from? The couple Christin and Mark have scoured menus across the country and in Europe, returning to test new tastes in store specials. The staff is also encouraged to try new combinations. Erica Loveridge, a server in the Helena store, says her favorite is the Hot Hawaiian with honey! "The honey," she claims, "balances out the spiciness of the jalapeno peppers and the BBQ sauce."

But the basic menu is still ninety-percent of what it was twelve years ago. "We want to stay true to our roots," says Steve, "yet continually evolve." And evolve they have indeed. Today at a MRPCo., you can enjoy the rich and creamy MacKenzie Alfredo pasta dish or the zesty Taos Salad, with their famous chicken chili served over fresh greens, crumbled blue corn chips, tomatoes, cheddar, green onions, pepperoncinis, housemade salsa & ranch dressing. Or, if you're in the mood for something a bit more traditional, put in an order for the Good Ol' Boy, a classic pepperoni pie that has been voted #1 pizza for twelve years running. The latest addition to the sandwich selection is the Willow Creek. A mouth-watering combo of turkey, bacon, avocado, spinach and fresh tomato on a pizzalike bread, it went straight to the top of the list of customer favorites.

Miles Nolte, a server in the Bozeman store, recognizes MRPCo.'s ability to "cater to any crowd." The introduction of the crunchy Italian thin crust was, incidentally, timed perfectly to meet the demands of a market leaning towards low-carb meals.



The high standards evident in each MRPCo.'s crew and surroundings are also unmistakable in the quality of the fare. The crusts are all made by hand with no preservatives and, although more expensive, MRPCo. chooses to use true Kalamata olives on their Athenian pizza and line-caught wild Alaskan salmon in their Smoked Wild Salmon Fettucine.

Walk into a MRPCo. restaurant today and it's clear just how successful the business has been in retaining the goals and character of their original concept and yet expand to a size that grosses more than \$16 million annually and employs over 650 people.

The MacKenzie River team has achieved what they set out to do: create an appealing environment that weds quality food with a quality lifestyle.



So if you're looking for a bite that is truly - yet uniquely - Montanan, cast a line at Mackenzie River. You won't be disappointed with your catch! And really, where else are you going to find grape nuts on your salad?



- 232 E. Main St. BOZEMAN • (406) 587-0055
Established in 1993 and located in historic downtown Bozeman.
- N. 19th St. & Rawhide Ridge BOZEMAN • (406) 582-0099
- MACKENZIE RIVER ROADHOUSE
2.5 miles S. of Four Corners • (406) 763-4600
- MONTANA ALE WORKS
611 E. Main St. • (406) 587-7700
- 409 W. Main St. BELGRADE • (406) 388-0016
Located on the west end of the Belgrade business loop.
- 3025 Grand Ave. BILLINGS • (406) 651-0068
On Billings West End, at the corner of Rehberg and Grand.
- 405 W. Main, BILLINGS HEIGHTS • (406) 254-0066 • Close to the Metra.
- 500 River Drive, GREAT FALLS • (406) 761-0085
- 1110 Road Runner Dr., off N. Montana Ave. HELENA • (406) 443-0033
- 1645 Hwy. 93 South, KALISPELL • (406) 756-0060
- 137 W. Front St. MISSOULA • (406) 721-0077
Downtown Missoula, with outside summer deck seating overlooking the Clark Fork River and the Caras Park carousel.
- 4880 N. Reserve, MISSOULA - ROWDY'S CABIN • (406) 721-0099.
- 9 Central Ave. WHITEFISH • (406) 862-6601

Stephanie Gandulla is a Bozeman resident who has contributed to Distinctly Montana in several past issues.





Raising cattle and preserving open space in the Greater Yellowstone Area for over 100 years.

We often hear people say, "You just can't get a good steak anymore." Many ranchers claim that the beef from their freezer is better than what they can buy in the store or at the restaurant. The ones we ranchers eat spend their entire lives in the wide open spaces and clean environment that so many people come here to enjoy.

OUR BEEF IS BORN, RAISED AND HARVESTED RIGHT HERE IN SOUTHWEST MONTANA THE OLD FASHIONED WAY. OUR CATTLE ARE NATURALLY FATTENED ON GRASS, HAY, OR LOCALLY GROWN GRAIN WITHOUT GROWTH HORMONES OR NON THERAPEUTIC ANTIBIOTICS IN THEIR FEED. WE DRY AGE OUR MEAT FOR THREE WEEKS TO ENHANCE TENDERNESS AND FLAVOR. OUR CATTLE ARE PROCESSED AT A MONTANA LICENSED FACILITY AND SOLD FROM OUR STORE IN BOZEMAN, MONTANA.




Montana Specialty Meat & Sausage Co.

2622 WEST MAIN ST. • BOZEMAN, MT 59715

406.587.5994