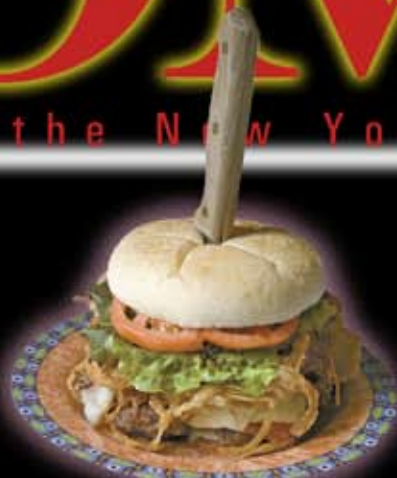


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BIG EATS



Gas workers spark a dining out boom, fueling restaurant expansions, new menus, new foods, and a new Pub in time for the Super Bowl.

By Michael Capuzzo



FEBRUARY 2012

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Even before he opened his strange and wonderful restaurant on Route 15 in the middle of what used to be a lovely, quiet nowhere; even before he discovered his small joint was sitting on the biggest underground rock formation-gas bonanza in North America; before he was called to cook thousands of meals for roughnecks and smooth execs attached to a supermajor oil company, big Aaron Hulslander was a hard man to surprise.

Surprises were Aaron's specialty—to give, not receive. It was surprising to see the giant of a man give up his head chef's job at high-profile Timeless Destination in Wellsboro, and set himself up in Mansfield in the converted Chinese-restaurant-ice cream parlor with a roof cantilevered like a 1950s Cadillac fin. Surprising to see him take the ice cream cone off the roof and hang out a big sign for Cast & Crew, an "Improvisational Restaurant," adorned with the comic/tragic faces of Greek drama.



SARAH WAGAMAN

It was surprising, too, to see the enormous white-clad chef, the size and shape of an NFL lineman retired just a few years, filling the open kitchen like a bull in a tight pen, a little yellow hat perched on his massive head, grumbly Old Man River-deep voice and wispy goatee, cheerfully tossing out outrageous dishes and throwing things—jokes and insults and food—at his customers. Hulslander challenged diners to ask for something not on the menu or any menu anywhere—their heart’s forbidden desire—something, anything, by God a new combination of molecules. (A chocolate dessert with root vegetables and apricot brandy? Gimme a minute).

“At the best restaurants, if you know the chef, he’ll make something special just for you,” he said. “Here, that special customer is everybody.”

The place—his lifelong dream—filled up nightly. The head chef got generally splendid reviews for creative, luscious food. He advertised “Fine Casual Dining, Take Out, Delivery, & Lame Jokes.” He was a man of a thousand tricks. He served “Italian Nachos” with mozzarella and marinara and “Deported Nachos”—with cheese and salsa. He made a Dustin Hoffman sandwich (vegetarian), Pacino pasta (steak medallions over French onion alfredo and angel hair), and the “Marie Antoinette” (white lump crabmeat, in a basket if necessary to finish the joke). There was double-comfort food—Blackened Chicken and Dumplin’s—and discomfort food, those gleefully gluttonous, bromo seltzer specials like The Cleveland Bound sandwich (grilled ham, salami, bacon, cheeses, “LT triple O and dueling sauces”). The menu was impossibly long, like a diner’s, in fact seemed like the result of a diner food delivery truck crashing through the kitchens of every gourmet and ethnic restaurant in town. The only predicable part of it was unpredictability—The “Off the Cuff” appetizer, the “Dare to Dine” entrée, the “Curtain Call” dessert, all a chef’s surprise. The



SARAH WAGAMAN

Top left: Aaron Hulslander, owner-chef of Cast & Crew in Mansfield, PA with his trademark Farley Burger. **Top right:** Three plates and a smile at Papa V’s Pizzeria in Mansfield, PA. **Above:** It’s a happy beer and sports crowd at the Wellsboro House in Wellsboro, PA. **Facing page:** Chris and Geoff Coffee greet customers at the family’s half-century-old Steak House in Wellsboro, PA.

menu, he said, was merely a guide, the alphabet of an infinite language. “The menu is endless.”

But the chef’s pride, his signature dish, was that down-home American classic, an enormous hamburger. Cast & Crew was “The Home of the Farley Burger,” in honor of the late, obese *Saturday Night Live* comedian Chris Farley. It was “the ultimate sandwich dedicated to excess,” the menu teased, “are you ready?” Here goes: a half-pound hamburger patty on a groaning sesame seed bun,

piled with layers, in approximate sequence, of bacon, salami, Swiss cheese, American Cheese, fried onions, caramelized onions, regular onions, red pepper mayo, horseradish mayo, lettuce, tomato, and a slice or two of ham that covered it like the ceiling of a building. It was more than a hand tall, complete with a steak knife driven through the top bun to hold everything in place. The Farley Burger costs \$8.99, and “comes with fries and a nap.”

The chef opened his place in 2008, just as the gas boom was beginning, and he didn't know what to expect. He served plenty of locals at night and hungry newcomers all day long, the white pickup trucks angled along his storefront. He found himself naturally creating for gas workers' southern-fried palates. "We brought in Dr. Pepper and Country Fried Steak. We use tenderloin, that's unusual, everyone uses the cheapest meats available." He wasn't surprised that the big men with big appetites flocked to his place, looking for entertainment on a plate. "They enjoy the fact that I'll go above and beyond for them. Out of the ordinary is mainstream for us."

Then things happened he didn't dream of. The gas crews started ordering "twelve and thirteen hamburger pickup orders, one after another, it gets real hectic" and "fifteen or twenty Philly Cheesesteaks (the 76er) to go." A sea change in his perception of things came with the takeout order in late January for the Farley Burger, until then a popular but novelty item for many diners: a gas crew wanted twenty of them. Say what?

"It was twenty Farley Burgers to go," he

said, marveling. "They took them right back to the site."

Big eats are the new norm in Tioga County. From dawn to midnight, from steak to eggs—from the nightly crowds at the Steak House on Main Street in Wellsboro to the ever-bustling Eddie's Restaurant on Route 15 in Mansfield—local eateries are booming.

Restaurants are building new rooms and printing new menus, adding southern flavors, chefs and owners are smiling, and consumers, with more and better choices, seem unabashedly happy about it, a public sentiment as rare as steak tartar when it comes to the Marcellus Shale. Eating out is the most popular, shared, joyful form of public entertainment in the northern tier of Pennsylvania, and the "restaurant scene" is now that, driven by an army of hungry men who drill down into the shale by day and into a thick porterhouse at night, or dip into the shale at night and into biscuits-and-gravy early morning at a sunrise counter. It's a feedback loop below and above ground, and the drilling and the eating never stop.

The gas play has made a lot of people happy, but they're quiet people—like the dairy

farmer who'd run up a \$500,000 lifelong debt because of depressed milk prices and rising farm costs. He had tears in his eyes when he showed Wellsboro accountant Tim Gooch his \$800,000 gas-lease check, allowing him to pay off his debts and own his 300 acres outright for the first time. Unhappy people talk more, talk about fretful change, and those hundred clearly visible reasons to worry. Where can one get away from it all, the tumult of rapid change and disagreements that never end? At our local restaurants, those precise geographic points where Marcellus and shale, marinara and kale, tectonic and dinner plates intersect, and strangers get to know one another; where dueling cultures make a contented truce.

Local restaurants are overwhelmingly family places, owner-run, roll-up-the-sleeves, real friendly places—there're more chains on a pickup's snow tires than among county eateries. From diners to the lovely river views and gourmet meals at Jamie Fry's Wren's Nest, they offer home cooking for field hands living in hotels or man-camps or Houston oil executives flown into town for a day. It's no

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wonder restaurants like the Steak House—owned and run by the Howey family for fifty-five years in the old house squeezed into 29 Main Street in Wellsboro—have become a home-away-from home for thousands of gas workers far from loved ones.

“When you come in the door, Chris and I feel like you’re coming to our house for dinner,” said Geoff Coffee, current owner of the Steak House with his wife, the former Chris Howey, whose grandfather, Fred, and Texas-born grandmother, Annie Jo, first bought the old Orange Tea Room in 1957 and renamed it The Steak House, living in the apartment upstairs. Fred and Annie Jo ran the place for twenty-two years until 1979, when Chris’s mom and dad, Barb and Dave Howey, took over for the next twenty-six years, passing the baton to Chris and Geoff in 2005. All three couples took over the business by falling into the deep end of June, when the Laurel Festival brought thousands of visitors, and the Steak House was packed that week and all summer long.

Starting a couple years ago, though, was the first time in memory The Steak House



SEBASTIAN WAGMANIAN

Lambs Creek is adding an expanded pub, open until midnight, featuring it’s hand-carved Irish bar.

was packed in the winter, too. Winter was usually when Geoff and Chris cut back the restaurant’s days and hours to save money; waitresses, cooks, and dishwashers went idle, and disappointed regulars trudged by the darkened restaurant in the desolate small town emptied by the bitter cold, on nights when a steak and brew really could have helped.

A couple winters ago, a stranger walked in the door on a quiet night, saw the Texas

longhorns that grandpa Fred brought back from Arizona half a century ago to decorate the coffered ceiling, and told Chris, “This place is gonna be hopping with gas guys.” She had no idea what he was talking about.

Now The Steak House on a typical busy winter night is jammed with perhaps thirty gas workers—gas workers whose presence opened the door for another thirty locals and other visitors to crowd the place, for a

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welcome change, on a Monday in January and February. "In the winter, you could say our business has doubled," Geoff said, "from twenty or thirty a night to fifty or sixty. Half the guys who come in here look up at those longhorns and tell me, "I feel like I'm in my living room, or my mom's dining room."

Now the restaurant staff has more work, and the small, cozy, wood bar has a lineup of gleaming new bottles—not just the regular Crown Royal, the southerners' mothers' milk at \$5 a shot, but also bottles of Crown Royal Black, Crown Royal Reserve, and the \$140-a-bottle, \$18-a-shot Crown Royal XR.

Bigger eats means bigger money percolating through the economy. A wildcatting spirit has spread through local kitchens, especially along Route 15, where Hulslander is far from the only chef-dreamer. No one dreams bigger or invests more in local eats than Nelle Rounsaville of Wellsboro, the petite, Texas-born, retired Northwest Airlines stewardess, real-estate investor, bed-and-breakfast proprietor, owner of the iconic Wellsboro Diner, owner of Lambs Creek Food & Spirits in Mansfield, all-around hard-driving, sweet-voiced southern tornado of creative energy.

Nelle wasn't caught off guard by the gas boom; she'd seen it before, growing up in Midland, Texas. "We're so blessed to have this happen to us. I know people here have good means, and money and all, but people depend on the economy to keep us going. I was a kid during the oil boom in Texas, and it feels like home. I just giggle when I see all the trucks, the rigs, and the derricks."

Nelle also opened her new restaurant, Lamb's Creek, just before the boom in 2008, when many locals were predicting the Route 15/future Route 99 corridor would carry Tioga County's future growth—many who never dreamed of what was just around the corner. She purchased the former Bonanza steak house on Lamb's Creek Road on a hill overlooking Route 15 and Mansfield. Then she spent more than \$1 million turning the chain restaurant space into a "fancy but fun" establishment in an eclectic, neo-Tuscan style with elegant stone fireplaces, Tiffany lamps, views of a colonnade and fountain out the sweeping hilltop windows, and a hand-carved bar imported from Ireland.

The gas money flowed in from the start, but now she sees a bigger opportunity

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to tap the Marcellus appetites. Nelle is ripping things up again to create a brand new restaurant and pub where once stood, well, her brand new restaurant. "It's in demand!" she cried. "We have listened to our customers and this is what they want: they want food later than 9 or 10 p.m." She's running a wall down the middle of the long dining room and hooking it left in an L to make a pub, the new Pub at Lamb's Creek. She's installing two new big stone fireplaces, three or four new big screen TVs, cozy oversized, overstuffed wing chairs, and whipping up a new Pub menu with food and drinks available until midnight. The new Pub, she said, will open on February 5, Super Bowl Sunday.

In downtown Mansfield, where Route 15 becomes Main Street, Papa V's Pizzeria has enjoyed a 30 percent jump in business, fueled in significant part by gas workers.

James Mack, the creative chef-owner of Papa Vs, also has about him somewhat of a larger-than-life quality. A lean six-foot-two, Mack was a U.S. Army sniper with the legendary 82nd Airborne, and did tours in Iraq and Afghanistan before drawing on his cooking school education and restaurant experience to launch a new career.

The newcomers inspired him to invest dramatically in his restaurant. Last summer, he expanded and completely renovated the restaurant, completing its transformation from a pizzeria with plastic-feeling booths into a handsome, casual sit-down Italian restaurant with Italian prints on mustard-colored walls. Pizza still flies out of the place, but now "we're 80 percent sit-down dining and 20 percent takeout pizza," Mack says, the reverse of when he bought the pizzeria five years ago.

Mack chatted with the newcomers, doing casual market research. "What they wanted was a comfortable place to get a good steak at an affordable price." The chef set up a commercial char-broiler in the back alley last summer, piped to the restaurant's gas line, and began grilling steak outdoors every Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. The special steaks were so popular with locals as well as gas workers he built a gazebo in the alley, and kept right on grilling outdoors through the winter.

The special steak is a fine New York Strip, dry-aged for more flavor and tenderness, a champagne steak at a beer price—\$14.99, including potato and salad. A big table of gas workers will order "six, seven, eight steaks all around." Mack grills them himself, and carries

the platter into the dining room himself with pride, "It's good to present a fine steak." It's good to have an appreciative audience at a sit-down restaurant, his dream. A round of applause is not unheard of. "The gas guys are really big eaters, and very generous tippers. They'll have a ten dollar bill and leave a waitress a ten or fifteen-dollar tip."

The timing was good for Debbie Sherman, too. She had leased Eddie's Restaurant on Route 15 for twenty-five years, then bought it with her husband, Butch, in 2004, and renovated in 2006—just before Lowe's came in right next door and the gas guys starting pouring in. The former truck stop, a local icon in business since the 1940s, hums with activity from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. Gas guys devour the biscuits and gravy, and a Hot Beef Sandwich with homemade roast beef, real mashed potatoes, vegetables, and coleslaw. "That's a plateful of food for \$6.59," Debbie says proudly. A plateful served in a family atmosphere that seems authentic because it is. Debbie's children once worked behind the counter. Debbie's veterans include Mary, who has waitressed for thirty-three years, and longtime manager Barb. "Business is fantastic," Debbie said.

Wellsboro restaurants are booming, too. At Harland's Family Style Restaurant, owner Harland Crawford says it's "amazing how many gas workers pop in here throughout the day. Our business in the last two years has grown dramatically. We'll make a gumbo soup for them, or okra, but those southern boys like steak and potatoes just as much."

The Wellsboro House, the restored 19th Century hotel and tavern at the intersection of the railroad tracks and owner Chris Kozuhowski's romantic roadhouse vision, has prospered with a Louisiana-trained chef already in place. "Business is great," Kozuhowski says. "We've really been blessed." He calls it not an increase in business but "an increase in friendships, in relationships. We like locals and everyone to be comfortable, and those away from families and friends become our extended family."

The Dumpling House, the Wellsboro Chinese restaurant popular with locals and tourists, shares a wall on Main Street with The Steak House, but not the gas clientele. "Not yet," said owner Gary Tso. "But soon," he said, given the many more workers on the way to town. Then he laughed, his trademark sudden loud laugh.

"In Texas, they eat a lot of Chinese food."