

## The Journey to 100 Acre Wood

A culinary refuge on the banks of Idaho's Salmon River

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JANIE OSBORNE



AMONG EAST CENTRAL IDAHO RESTAURANTS, where rib-eye steak is king and king crab legs are exotica, 100 Acre Wood is an anomaly whose time, paradoxically, has come.

The influx of newcomers seeking vacation homes and retirement homes in the remote mountain towns, whose backdrop is the Continental Divide and whose foreground is the scenic Salmon River, has inevitably produced a palate seeking fresh seasonal fare, inventive sauces from fruits and berries and a figure who has earned the right to wear whites.

That was the clientele that 100 Acre Wood owners Jon and Nancy Cummings, a husband and wife team who serve as host and executive chef, sought to cater to when they opened the resort-cum-gourmet restaurant on the banks of the North Fork Salmon River in 1996. But the neo-day land

rush that has ushered in hobby ranches and upscale housing developments had yet to hit and to bring with it a hankering for haute cuisine.

"People were not quite ready for it, but we made them ready for it," Jon Cummings says about the menu's variation on Caribbean, Asian and Italian themes and about a dining experience that is as much about the setting as it is about the food.

The window-to-window expanse that stretches across the 40-seat dining area looks out onto a river-fed trout pond enclosed by aspens and cottonwoods and framed by aquatic grasses that attract deer, elk and the occasional black bear. It is not every eatery where artfully arranged plates of mussels smothered in creamy basil and honey-stung chicken must compete for attention with a standoff between bugling bull elk or mule deer fawns frolicking with one of 100 Acre Wood's domesticated ducks.

There is an aura about 100 Acre Wood that lends itself to enchantment, from the moment guests step through the

swinging side doors and hear the comforting creak of the painted wood planks that anchor the dining area's décor, which exemplifies rustic chic. Along log walls, antique outfitting equipment nestles next to custom-crocheted doilies and hand-painted china brightens sideboards and window sills.

Where urban eateries can count on a percentage of drop-in diners and where sheer numbers — in operating hours and population — bolster profits, 100 Acre Wood has sought to turn the strikes of a long drive, limited hours and pre-ordering into advantages by capturing a repeat audience that believes the food and atmosphere are all worth the effort.

The menu, which changes monthly, is a little bit whimsical and very refreshing. The starters, particularly the bite of brie garlanded with roasted garlic and fresh fruits, whet the appetite without overwhelming it. Entrees are enlivened by Nancy's signature sauces, which marry such subtle flavors as pomegranate to robust partners such as ginger. Nancy boldly allows apple chutney to cozy up to prime rib of pork and infuses boneless breast of duck with chokecherry. She showcased fresh ingredients before they became *de rigueur* at leading restaurants and emphasized presentation long before servings began to resemble edible art.

The restaurant, which operates side-by-side with the couple's bed and breakfast and outdoor adventure operation, is open Thursday through Saturday and closed entirely from New Year's to Valentine's Day. The com-

munity closest to 100 Acre Wood is Salmon, Idaho, 20 miles south on U.S. Highway 93; and while locals flock to the restaurant for special occasions, tourists driving from vacation valleys are vital to the 11-year-old enterprise, too.

Of equal importance is the expertise Nancy brings to the eatery after 40 years in the business. She grew up helping her parents run the Salmon River Café, a Main Street landmark, and if there was a single lesson that stands out from the multitude she learned the old-fashioned way, it is that word-of-mouth reviews can make or break a family-run operation.

"When my dad heard we were planning to open a restaurant in the middle-of-nowhere Idaho, he said, 'It had better be damned good because no one will drive all the way out there otherwise,'" Nancy recalls.

Tod Roemer, a retired insurance executive who owns three homes, one of which is located in western Montana's Bitterroot Valley, says the drive is not paramount in his mind when he and his wife book a table at 100 Acre Wood. "It's the best restaurant in Montana," he says, laughing. "The food is outstanding, Nancy's wonderful, and Jon's a character — any questions?"



**Clockwise from Opposite:** Owner Nancy Cummings stands in the restaurant before opening to another busy night of dinner service. • The pastoral setting of 100 Acre Wood along the banks of the North Fork of the Salmon River is worth the long drive from Salmon, Idaho or Montana's Bitterroot Valley. • 100 Acre Wood uses fresh ingredients straight from the garden.



Dining in the cozy restaurant comes with the promise of savory foods made with fresh ingredients.

The entrees and appetizers at 100 Acre Wood are consistently excellent, although chefs are here again and gone again because of the faraway location and because the restaurant serves for them as an ideal launching pad but less-than-ideal destination. What has allowed for such dishes as a wasabi-touched salmon that every time is crispy on the outside, tender within and only as hot as an afterthought, is Nancy's oversight of the kitchen, come chef, come cook.

"After 11 years, we know what works and what doesn't," she says.

Credit is due to the school of hard knocks, which graduated Nancy Cummings with honors. In the early days, the couple struggled with a brilliant but troubled chef that Nancy had worked with in the lap of restaurant luxury in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Armed with her tenure in both the back and the front of the house, Nancy rose to become one of St. Croix's most celebrated dessert makers.

While vacationing in her hometown in the early 1990s she became reacquainted with Jon Cummings, whom she knew but barely acknowledged during their years at Salmon High

School. The pair had occupied separate orbits, with Nancy Gott being the glittering star of the popular crowd and Jon surviving as one of Lemhi County's few long-haired hippies.

"She was always dating my friends," he recalls. And the prospect of sparking interest became more remote in 1978, when Nancy was named Miss Idaho. "Then it was, omigod Miss Idaho," Jon says.

When the two met as adults at a popular Salmon night-spot in 1994 it was love at first sight, Jon said.

At the time, the former promoter of such heavy metal acts as Ozzie Osbourne and Alice Cooper called California home, where he worked as a mechanical engineer. The life-changing encounter with Nancy triggered a change of residence.

For nearly 20 years Jon had worked on a three-story log house in Salmon without a compelling reason to finish what he originally envisioned as his private retreat. The couple had long-wished to return to Salmon, but as any native knows, the job opportunities are as limited as the namesake river is long. They married in 1995; one year and countless construction hours later, they opened 100 Acre Wood in the cabin that had remained unfinished for so long.

Nancy worked in the kitchen under the tutelage of her chef-friend from the Islands and Jon became the face of the front of the house and its unflappable arbiter. As a result, dining at 100 Acre Wood is anything but anonymous. The owners exude a sincere friendliness and their solicitude for guests has included ad hoc laundry service when one diner toppled his merlot. Jon and Nancy are part comedy team, part dynamic duo and all sympathetic ears. "We've tried to create an atmosphere where everyone feels comfortable, whether they are wearing jeans or a suit," says Nancy.

And 100 Acre Wood is easy on the wallet. Dishes are mostly in the mid-teens and the wine list, which includes some of Idaho's finest, is upstanding without being pretentious.

With the vast majority of restaurants failing within five years of startup, 100 Acre Wood has sailed over obstacles that have proved insurmountable for some. "It's Nancy," says Jon Cummings. "She won't fail at anything; she refuses to fail."

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*Laura Zuckerman lives and writes in Salmon, Idaho. Her work has appeared in the New York Times, Wildlife Art and Country magazines. In addition to the Big Sky Journal, Janie Osborne's photos have been published in The New York Times, Town & Country, Martha Stewart Weddings, Parenting and Babytalk, among others. **BSJ***

## Baked Shrimp Dynamite

*Jumbo Shrimp, 5 per person*

### Dynamite Sauce

- 1 roasted red bell pepper, peeled and seeded
- 1 cup mayonnaise
- 1 1/2 teaspoon fresh chopped garlic
- 1/2 teaspoon sesame oil
- 1 1/2 tablespoon Sriracha hot sauce (available in oriental markets)

Splash lemon juice

Fresh herbs can be added: we have used fresh basil and cilantro.



Place all ingredients in a food processor until smooth.  
Preheat oven to 350 degrees.  
Peel, devein and butterfly 5 jumbo shrimp  
Place in an ovenproof baking dish, top with dynamite sauce

and bake until shrimp are no longer opaque and sauce is slightly browned, approximately 15-20 minutes.  
Top with sliced green onions and black sesame seeds.  
This dish is also great with fresh oysters.

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### Key Lime Pie

This is a recipe for “real” Key lime pie. Real Key lime pie is not green and does not have a soft pudding texture. This is a very simple recipe and takes only a few minutes to prepare, and it is the real deal!

#### Crust

- 16 graham crackers, crushed
- 3 Tablespoons sugar
- 1/4 pound butter or margarine, melted

Mix ingredients and press into a 9-inch pie plate. Bake in a pre-heated 350 degree oven for 10-12 minutes until lightly browned. Let cool.



#### Pie Filling

- 4 large or extra large egg yolks
- 1 14 oz. can sweetened condensed milk
- 1/4 cup fresh squeezed lime juice (Regular limes are fine, but use real Key limes if you can get them.)

Beat egg yolks with an electric mixer until they are thick and turn to a light yellow. Turn off mixer and add condensed milk. Mix on low, then add half of lime juice. Once the juice is incorporated, add the other half, and continue to mix until blended. Pour into pie shell and bake at 350 degrees for 12 minutes to set the yolks. Cool at room temperature.

Freeze the pie at this point. It will keep indefinitely.

To serve, cut pie, allow to stand for 5-10 minutes, top with fresh whipped cream.

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### **Baja Seafood Cocktail**

*Serves 4*

This is 100 Acre Wood's version of the popular appetizer served all over Mexico.

- 1/4 cup ketchup
- 1/4 cup lemon or lime juice (we use a mixture of both)
- 1 to 2 teaspoons hot sauce (Tabasco or your own favorite)
- 1 pound cooked small shrimp
- 1/2 pound crab meat
- 1/2 cup tomatoes, chopped
- 1/4 cup red onion, chopped
- 1/4 cup yellow bell peppers, chopped
- 1/4 cup fresh cilantro, chopped
- 2 avocados, chopped
- 1/4 teaspoon black pepper

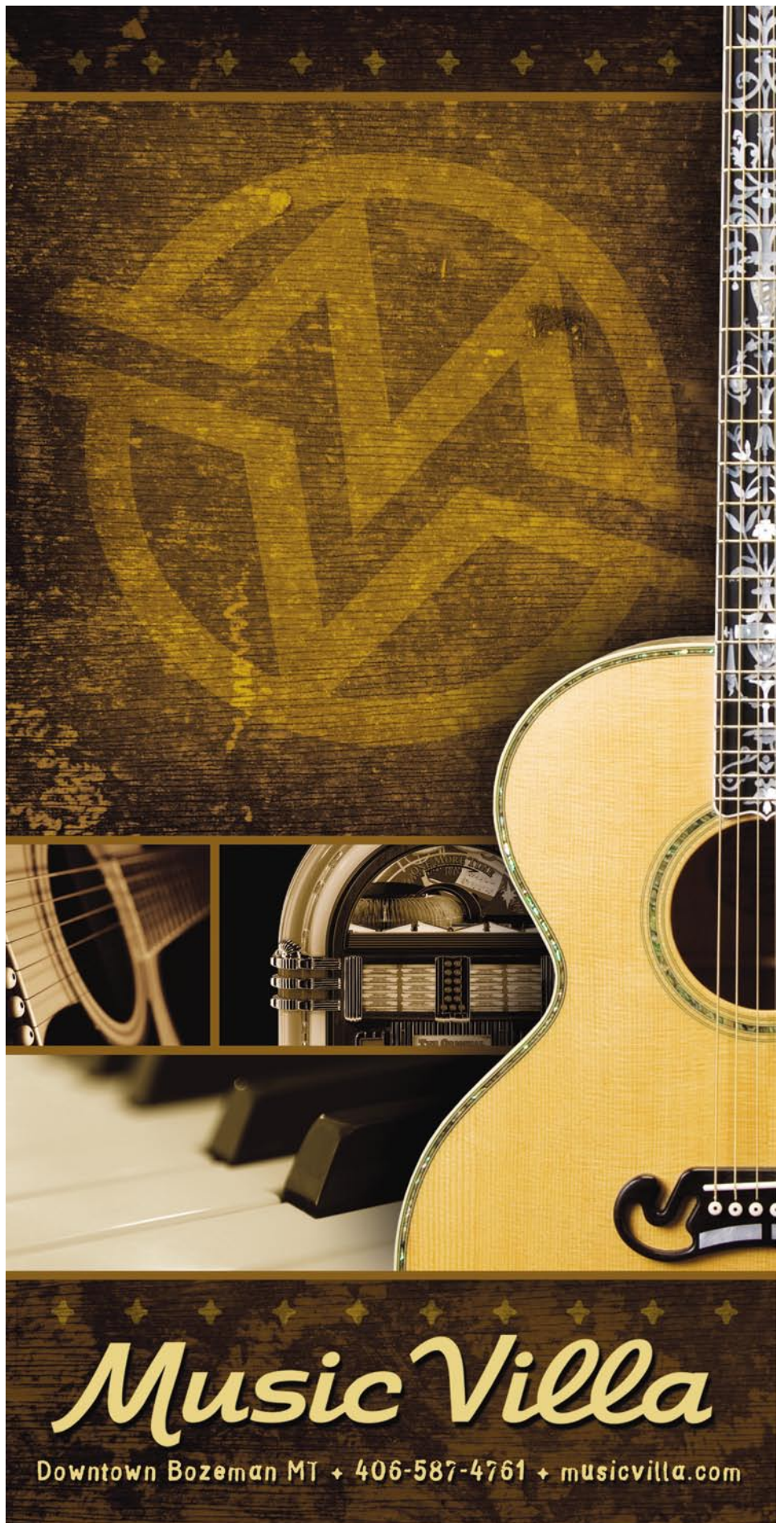
In a large bowl, stir together ketchup, lime juice and hot sauce.

Add seafood, tomato, onion, bell pepper, cilantro and pepper. Toss to coat.

Cover and chill for several hours.

Just before serving, add avocados and toss.

Run a lime wedge around the rims of Martini glasses; dip in Old Bay Seasoning. Add cocktail mixture. Garnish with lime wedges, cilantro and homemade tortilla chips.



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