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RESTAURANT
GUIDE

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Gourmet

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tell all*

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Beef Stampede

From the humblest dive to the most elegant dining room, this town turns out to be a **meat eater's mecca**

By JANE and MICHAEL STERN



bison, musk ox, and wild boar.) In Calgary, the beef is often dramatically different from the finest U.S. beef; at its best, it is peerless. John Gilchrist, author of *My Favourite Restaurants in Calgary & Banff*, says that he can easily taste the difference between a sirloin strip from a Texas cow and one from Alberta. "Ours are grass-raised," he explains. "The beef you will eat here is marbled white, whereas corn-fed is yellow." As he explains the natural cattle-raising philosophy of the nearby A7 Ranche, we slice into an A7 strip loin at **River Café**, a scenic restaurant in the heart of the city. Sitting on an open deck under the shade of poplar cottonwood trees, we swoon at the heavyweight protein punch in every bite.

It is a gorgeous setting, the only place of business in Prince's Island Park, where cars are prohibited. We arrive via a bridge across a narrow estuary of the Bow River, one of three pedestrian bridges that provide access to the island. On the grounds around the restaurant, folkies sing ballads for coins tossed in their guitar cases, dogs and owners play Frisbee on the lawn, and lovers stroll and smooch by the water. The café has the feel of a fishing lodge, with wood-

slat tables and waiters' stations made of half canoes standing upright. Sizzling-meat aromas waft through the dining area. As the sun sets and the lamps are lit, and you drink Canada-roasted Kicking Horse coffee and ice wine in the clear

CALGARY'S ANNUAL STAMPEDE is one of the biggest of all summer paydays for rodeo cowboys. But for anyone who loves the West, Canada's Rocky Mountain cow town—surrounded by cattle ranches, oil fields, and places to ride, hike, ski, hunt, and fish in the breathtaking scenery around Lake Louise—is a bonanza year round.

And what's more western than a plate of great beef? (No disrespect intended to the Pacific seafood that makes its way into the city's ambitious kitchens, or the justly celebrated Rocky Mountain lamb, or such high-end menu curiosities as



There are good reasons why some 5 million visitors came to Calgary last year; River Café, left, is just one of them.

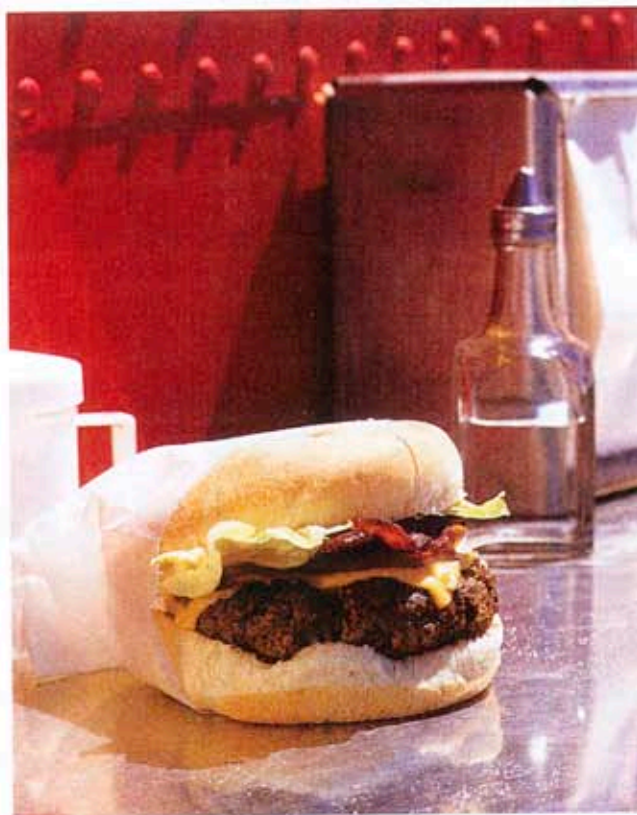
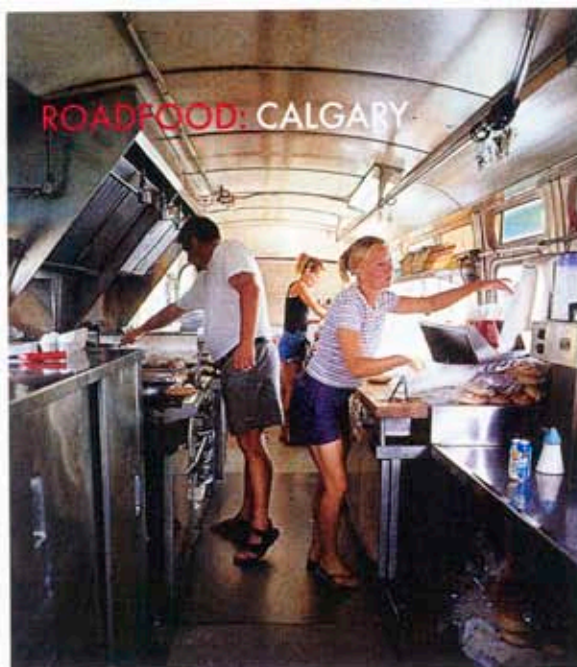
PHOTOGRAPHS: ROTH AND HARRIS

Alberta air, you can fully understand all those cowboy songs about the magic of a western night.

THE BEST BEEF we tried was Galloway, a Scottish breed that is raised on a handful of ranches and served in only a few restaurants, including **The Owl's Nest**, in the Westin hotel, the swankiest dining room in town (a rose for milady; personalized embossed matchbooks for sir). It is amazing stuff: not remarkably tender, but with a potency that is at once earthy and elegant. As we understand it, Galloway cows have a thick coat, so fat doesn't need to go straight to the outside for insulation; rather, it saturates the fibers of the meat, which remains relatively lean but flooded with flavor. The result: steak for the carnivore who craves maximum beefiness per bite.

At the other end of the opulence meter, **Rocky's Burger Bus**—a 1960s urban-transit bus long ago run aground in an industrial park at the southeast corner of town—also offers great beef. You order your food by stepping up on a metal grate at the window a few rows behind what used to be the driver's seat. (By local ordinance, proprietor Jim Rockwell must be able to drive the bus away with 24 hours' notice. That would be an astounding feat considering how deeply ensconced in silt it is.) Ask for a single or double burger with french fries, then wait a while at one of the picnic tables, painted red to match the bus. This is *not* fast food. Hamburgers are hand-pattied extra-thick and slow-cooked on the grill inside. Potatoes are cut and fried to order, and when things get busy—as they do at lunch, when battered pickups and Mercedes fight for parking space in the adjoining prairie grass—the french fry production runs behind demand.

The hamburgers are ravishing: broader than the bun, cooked through but as-



tonishly succulent, with craggy black outsides that have a crunch and savor like thick bacon. A single is a big sandwich. A double is a meat orgy.

Rockwell says he tried using a machine to form the patties, but they lost their character because it pressed the meat too hard. "Turned them into mush," he sneers. We ask if his beef is AAA grade—the Canadian equivalent of choice—at which he shrugs and says, "I guess so. What I don't take, the butcher

makes into expensive steak." He turns to the grill to tend the sputtering patties and we call into the bus to ask his opinion on what makes these hamburgers so good. His two-word answer, shouted from the meaty vapors that surround him, is one we now know well: "Alberta beef!"

BUT BEEF ISN'T the whole story in Calgary. A week's worth of surprising meals included everything from Rocky Mountain oysters at a local pub's Testicle Festival to heirloom tomato salad at Wild Sage, in a shopping center food court.

We often started our day at **The Planet**. Their espresso is a basso profundo roast that is to ordinary coffee what top cream is to milk: not merely strong, but big and richly flavored. We had amazing Dutch pancakes at **Pfanntastic Pannenkoek Haus**, where each one is a perfect circle a foot wide and a quarter inch thick, as tender as a crêpe, with a million brittle-edged bubbles across its lacy top and insides smooth as custard. They offer meat and fruit toppings galore, but we liked nothing more than a squeeze of lemon juice with brown sugar.

A former Calgarian had told us not to miss **Chicken on the Way**, a

Rocky's Burger Bus doesn't serve fast food, but it's food worth waiting for. And despite appearances, it could move if it had to—it's a city ordinance, after all.

ROADFOOD: CALGARY

vintage takeout shack where we plowed through several bright yellow and red cardboard boxes filled with crisp deep-fried chicken nestled among piles of great french fries and ultra-crunchy corn fritters.

LIKE SO MANY CITIES that were once western outposts, Calgary abounds in Chinese restaurants that are old-fashioned (and out of fashion). It also has modern places that expanded their menus beyond chow mein in the 1970s. Foremost among these is the **Silver Inn**, where ginger-and-chile-crusting deep-fried strips of beef were introduced to Calgary in 1974. Ginger beef is now served by virtually every Chinese restaurant in town.

No one with a taste for fresh-baked bread and chocolate ice cream (a perfect meal, as far as we're concerned) should miss **Manuel Latruwe**. This Belgian patisserie bakes beautiful baguettes and sells chocolate ice cream that might be the best on this continent. Using chocolate

from neighbor Bernard Callebaut, Monsieur Latruwe and his wife, Lieve, make an ice cream that is luminously chocolaty but not cloying. They don't scoop in their little bakery, but they do have sit-down tables for pastry eating, and they will bring you a bowl and spoons. Grab a half liter from the freezer and serve yourself.

One final Calgary experience you won't want to miss: shopping at the Alberta Boot Company (which makes both the classic cowboy-style and the knee-high parade boots worn by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police). After an arduous quarter hour of lacing himself in and out of a pair of beautiful but way too labor-intensive RCMP Wellingtons, Michael eased into tall bull-hide cowboy boots so comfortable that he wore them home.

"Going to Texas?" asked a security guard at the Minneapolis airport, where the new boots got X-rayed. "Who needs Texas?" Michael responded. "I'm coming from Calgary."

RIVER CAFÉ

Prince's Island Park
403-261-7670

THE OWL'S NEST

320 4th Avenue S.W.
403-266-1611

ROCKY'S BURGER BUS

4645 12th Street S.E.
403-243-0405

THE PLANET COFFEE ROASTERS

2212 4th Street S.W.
403-541-0960

PFANNTASTIC PANNENKOEK HAUS

2439 54th Avenue S.W.
403-243-7757

CHICKEN ON THE WAY

1443 Kensington Road N.W.
403-283-5545

SILVER INN

2702 Centre Street N.E.
403-276-6711

MANUEL LATRUWE BELGIAN PATISSERIE

1333 1st Street S.E.
403-261-1092 ☎