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Riversong Lodge has come a long way since 1984, when Carl and Kirsten Dixon bought a one-room log cabin on prime salmon waters in Lake Creek, Alaska.

Warming to Alaska

By Anne Z. Cooke
SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Riversong Lodge is home to fine foods

THE CATCH of the day at Riversong Lodge is salmon — as it is every day during the season here on the Yentna River in the Alaskan bush. In the kitchen, owner Kirsten Dixon is sharpening her knife, about to fillet a fresh 40-pound king salmon into 6-ounce portions.

Her three sous chefs are slicing carrots and oiling parchment paper. It's pushing 80 degrees today, but Mrs. Dixon is all business, working quickly and smoothly, her long brown hair tied back on her neck.

There are 35 hungry guests, after all, lounging on the deck overlooking the Yentna and swapping fish stories in the long twilight. But the wait is worth it. As Mrs. Dixon's husband, Carl, refills wineglasses and spins tales about strange bear encounters, good smells floating from the kitchen confirm that Mrs. Dixon, trained at the Cordon Bleu in Paris, is one of Alaska's top chefs.

Now Mrs. Dixon hurries to her garden behind the lodge to pick parsley. Herbs sprout like weeds, competing for space with broccoli, carrots, cabbage, snow peas, rhubarb and strawberries. The garden, coaxed to jungle size by 18 hours of daily summer sunlight, supplies salads and most vegetable dishes. The moose and caribou that Mr. Dixon hunted the previous winter are butchered and stored in the freezer.

Some of Mrs. Dixon's ingredients are native to Alaskan waters — halibut, shrimp, crab, salmon and trout. Mushrooms, blueberries, raspberries and currants she finds near the lodge. Staples — beef, flour for fresh-baked bread, oranges, lemons, milk, butter, salt and sugar — come from Anchorage the same way the guests do, by floatplane.

Riversong Lodge has come a long way since 1984, when the Dixons bought a one-room log cabin on prime salmon waters and served chili and burgers to passing fishermen. Their two toddlers are now teen-agers, nine guest cabins surround the rustic log lodge, and Riversong is as famous for its food as for top-flight salmon sport fishing.

The Dixons have expanded their business by buying Winter Lake Lodge, which is open in winter.

The inevitable result of the Dixons' success — "The Riversong Lodge Cookbook" (Alaska Northwest Books) — showcases a sampling of Mrs. Dixon's regional cookery. Though some dishes are typically Alaskan, most use ingredients found in all grocery stores; she suggests substitutes for those that aren't. Beef



Top: Planes simplify transportation during the winter. Above: Lodge guests gather in the dining room to enjoy the bounty of Alaskan produce and game.

Cut parchment paper into 10-inch squares and oil top side of each square with canola oil. Place 1 fillet on center of each oiled side of parchment paper and top with equal portions of carrot and leek.

Mix together mirin, sesame oil, soy sauce and lemon juice. Drizzle sauce over fish, then sprinkle with sesame seeds. Fold sides of paper over fish, tucking in sides and joining top in several folds so juices won't leak out.

Add about 1 inch water to fish steamer, roasting pan or other deep container with lid and bring water to boil. Place paper packets on raised rack (not in the water). Cover and steam 8 minutes. Place individual packets on plates and remove paper to serve. (Packets can be prepared ahead of time and cooked just before serving.) Makes 4 servings.

Riversong moose stew

Mrs. Dixon prefers moose meat, which is mild and lean. I substituted beef round steak.

- 6 strips bacon
- 2 to 3 pounds moose meat or beef, cut into 1-inch cubes
- 3 tablespoons flour
- Salt, pepper
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 cups dry red wine
- 1 cup beef stock (canned is fine)
- 3 tablespoons brandy
- ½ teaspoon dried thyme
- ½ teaspoon dried marjoram
- ½ orange
- Whole cloves
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 3 large carrots, coarsely chopped
- ½ pound large mushrooms, quartered

Cook bacon in large oven-proof casserole until brown and crisp. Remove to paper towel and set aside.

Dredge meat with flour and salt and pepper to taste. Brown, stirring, in bacon drippings for 10 minutes. Break cooked bacon strips into thirds and combine with onion, garlic, wine, beef stock, brandy, thyme and marjoram. Add to meat mixture and stir over medium heat until thickened and bubbly, about 10 minutes.

Stud outside of orange with cloves and tuck into meat mixture. Bake, covered, at 350 degrees for 2 hours. (Moose meat requires a little longer cooking time.)

Melt butter in large skillet. Add carrots and mushrooms and cook until tender, 10 minutes. When stew meat is done, mix vegetables into meat to coat with gravy. Cover and cook 5 minutes longer. Discard orange before serving. Makes 4 servings.

for moose meat, for example, or blueberries for wild currants.

Though these dishes look elegant when served, they're easy to prepare. And they're hearty. As Mrs. Dixon warns her readers, Alaskan cookery is "country food for hard-working people."

The following recipes are from "The Riversong Cookbook."

Steamed salmon in paper

- 4 skinless, boned salmon fillets (6 ounces each)
- Canola oil

- 1 large carrot, julenned
- 1 leek, green part discarded, white portion julenned
- 2 tablespoons mirin (Japanese rice wine)
- 2 teaspoons sesame oil
- 2 tablespoons soy sauce
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- 2 tablespoons sesame seeds
- 1 roll parchment paper (not wax paper), available in better large grocery stores

Buy pre-cut fillets or ask a butcher to cut thick salmon pieces from center of fish. (Mrs. Dixon uses fresh-caught Pacific salmon, of course, but Atlantic salmon is fine). Divide into fillets.