

At Canlis, Dinner With a Side of Camaraderie

FOOD, TRAVEL | By HOWIE KAHN | AUGUST 24, 2012, 9:00 AM | 8 Comments

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Brian Canlis

The board members for Seattle's Canlis restaurant driving cattle on S Ranch near Pryor, Mont.

Last summer, Mark and Brian Canlis — the co-owners of the Seattle restaurant **Canlis** — mounted two horses near Pryor, Mont., and proceeded, on Day 1 of their annual board meeting, to chase off a couple of bears. They rode out of the barn on the 200,000-acre **S Ranch**, an hour south of Billings, with their board members, all close confidants of the family, including a tech entrepreneur (and childhood neighbor), a restaurant owner and hotelier (a college classmate), and a finance executive who introduced Mark to his wife and insisted on only being called “Big Steve.”

The land rolled out in front of the pack. Five thousand heads of Black Angus and American Wagyu made slow, nutritional use of the property. One hundred fifty prize-winning quarter horses charged around between the buttes as if rehearsing for a truck commercial. And, after a difficult and trying year in the business, this pair of restaurant-owning brothers — third-generation proprietors of a six-decade-old fine dining establishment that’s currently in the midst of a renaissance — had just sent recession’s spirit animal sprinting off and up a tree.

When not chasing bears, or running a board meeting in a style somewhere between a **TED Talk** and group therapy, Mark, 37, and Brian, 34, spend a lot of their time asking the question “Is that Canlis?” They’ve been asking it with greater frequency since becoming their restaurant’s majority shareholders in 2010, relieving their parents, Chris and Alice, at the helm after 33 years of service. “Is that Canlis?” starts as a question about their restaurant, then becomes a question about their identity and then it becomes a question about their restaurant again. There’s really no separation between the two things. The family is the restaurant; the restaurant is the family. It’s one continuous loop. “Is that Canlis?” speaks deeply to the braided matter of hospitality and relationships. It can be applied to the time it takes to dry age a duck breast (14 to 21 days, they’ve decided, is very Canlis) or to coat-check theory (no tickets; people are not numbers) or to empathy (there’s never enough) or to what to do when diners who ate at the restaurant in, say,

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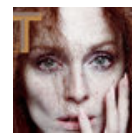
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1963 want the an item from the 1963 menu instead of any of the current offerings. (No doubt, you give it to them.)



Brian Canlis

Chef Franey's roasted young beets, candied pecans, poached pear and blue Stilton cheese.

But the question was most significantly applied in 2008 when the family hired Jason Franey — then 31 and Daniel Humm's executive sous chef at [Eleven Madison Park](#) in New York — to run their kitchen. For the Canlises, Franey's presence inevitably and intentionally indicated a departure from the traditional steaks, chops and sauced fish filets that made their restaurant a Seattle institution, and it signified a shift toward the kinds of elegantly composed, modernist dishes (pork loin with pine ash, diver scallops with preserved lemon) that would continue to lure locals while courting destination diners from all over the world. Canlis was already the place in Seattle where you went to get engaged, blew out birthday candles and clinked Champagne flutes on an anniversary. Dave Matthews and Jeff Bezos ate there; the restaurant catered Ichiro Suzuki's birthday. It hardly seemed like a formula to mess with. But ultimately, the brothers decided it was just more Canlis to be progressive. "We had a choice," Brian said. "We could have become the [Commander's Palace](#) of Seattle. We chose instead to become relevant."

"When the restaurant opened," said Brian, peering out from beneath his cowboy hat, "our grandfather, who founded it, didn't serve a menu of classics. He brought in ingredients no one had seen before. He stretched boundaries." Mark, riding beside him, holding his reins in one hand, added, "All our history prompted people to say we were ruining Canlis when we brought in Jason and changed the food. We called it 'The Great Experiment' because it disconnected the restaurant from some of its relationships. But we thought by staying innovative, we were bringing it back to the way it began, back to its roots." And it's paying off. Last year Franey was named one of [Food & Wine's Best New Chefs](#) and the dining room is perpetually packed, in part by those who also innovate for a living. When I visited, one table was booked, I was told, by a man who invented the computer program Excel, had traveled to outer space twice and dated Martha Stewart.

The restaurant itself was built by Peter Canlis, Mark and Brian's paternal grandfather, in 1950. But it was Peter's father, Nicholas, who set the family business into motion. "He swam from Greece to Turkey," Brian said, "and eventually walked and hitchhiked to Cairo. He worked at a famous hotel there and met Teddy Roosevelt in 1909. Since Nicholas could cook, Roosevelt took him out on safari for almost a year." Later, Nicholas Canlis opened a diner in Stockton, Calif, but Peter, his son, had his eye on finer fare. Peter moved to Hawaii with plans to open a proper restaurant, but the bombing of Pearl Harbor left him running food operations for the U.S.O. instead. He'd eventually open the Broiler (Joan Didion mentioned it in an essay about Hawaii in *The Saturday Evening Post* that's now on Page 191 of "[Slouching Towards Bethlehem](#)") in Waikiki in 1947.



Brian Canlis

Canlis Restaurant

Back on the mainland, Peter Canlis, with the architect **Roland Terry**, built a Modernist structure in Seattle surrounded by deodar cedars and scots pines overlooking Lake Union. The Cascade range was visible in the distance and the building's generously sized windows and its prowlike position high above the water gave it a sense of elegance, transparency and distinction. Its stone hearth made it inviting. Peter Canlis lived on the building's second floor, treating guests on the first as if they had entered his home.

Peter capitalized on his relationship with Pan Am airlines, whose executives all knew him from frequent flights, to bring species of Hawaiian fish back to Canlis in Seattle. "They'd never seen mahi-mahi," Mark said. "He would put it between the jump seats on the plane and bribe the pilots with \$20 bills." Canlis was the first dining room in the city known for its open kitchen, the first to serve fresh oysters and, according to the family, the first with a liquor license, allowing it to serve liquor by the drink. John Wayne, who'd visit Seattle on his yacht, the Wild Goose, was a regular. On his way out of the restaurant, he'd always happily curse at the cooks. "Everyone would cheer," Brian said.

When a third Canlis restaurant was installed on the top floor of the Portland Hilton, things took a turn right out of "**Mad Men**." "Peter and Conrad Hilton were pals," Brian said, "and there was a deal in place to put Canlis restaurants in new Hiltons across the world. London, Paris, that kind of thing." But Peter balked at the idea of partnership. "He couldn't run a restaurant with somebody else even though it was so lucrative and such a big deal." To get out of the agreement, Peter flew down to Beverly Hills, got drunk, crashed a Hilton board meeting and cussed everybody out. "The board," Brian said, "refused on the spot to do business with a guy that crazy."



Brian Canlis

Members of the board, from left to right: Mark Canlis, Steve Foote, Jim Scott, Tom Clifton, Will Guidara and Brian Canlis.

Flash forward to the Montana board meeting presided over by Mark and Brian Canlis, which was decidedly more sane. We had a gun, but limited booze. Big Steve handed out cigars with labels bearing his own picture. All the food, with the exception of 12 pounds of S Ranch T-bone, came from the restaurant in Seattle. We picked it up at Edwards Jet Center in Billings after catching a ride into town on a Cessna CJ3 belonging to a Canlis family friend. Coho salmon filets as long and as wide as the blades of canoe paddles, lumps of Dungeness crab, lobster tails and various vac-packed cooking and dipping liquids waited for us in a meticulously organized box. Fresh baked cookies had been set out for our arrival. Brian Canlis, who ran the lounge for Air Force One while enlisted in the military, identified them with one quick sniff: “I used to make those for George W. Bush,” he said. “**Otis Spunkmeyer**. Bush loved them.”

Before dinner, Mark and Brian were asked to help move a few hundred steaks-in-training from one gated pasture to another. They yelled out “Ya! Ya!” at the cows while the cows called out for their calves and their calves loudly lowed back. The range filled up with sound: families doing all they could to talk it out, move together, stay close.



Brian Canlis

Dinner on the ranch: lobster and grass-fed T-bone steaks.

Later, the board drank wine out of metal mugs (Côte-Rôtie, cabernet, riesling and a

Rhone). They cooked their meal and talked about their feelings — openly, critically and questioningly — around the campfire because real talk is critical to the restaurant’s existence. The Canlises hold dear the notion that their relationships with one another, and with their closest confidants, will be reflected and honored in the relationships they build with their staff and with their customers. It is every bit a restaurateur’s version of psychotherapeutic transference.

“This is one of the most important things I’ll do all year,” said Mark, while Brian set a grate the length of a door over the fire. The coals burned low and hot, charring the steaks and the lobster tails, which Mark doused with vermouth from one of the vacuum-sealed bags. Potatoes wrapped in foil softened in the ashes beneath. Black truffle was shaved over everything and the sky choked up quickly with stars. “We’re not making decisions out here,” said Mark, knifing cold butter over the lobsters. “We’re forming relationships. That’s gold when you’re running a business. All business is about relationships, unless you work in a lighthouse, and all relationships are about trust.”

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