

# THE ULTIMATE HOMEMADE GIFT

# Gourmet

THE MAGAZINE OF GOOD LIVING

## HOW TO MAKE THIS THE BEST HOLIDAY EVER

### GOOD LIVING ROADFOOD

PHOTOGRAPH BY JANE AND MICHAEL STERN



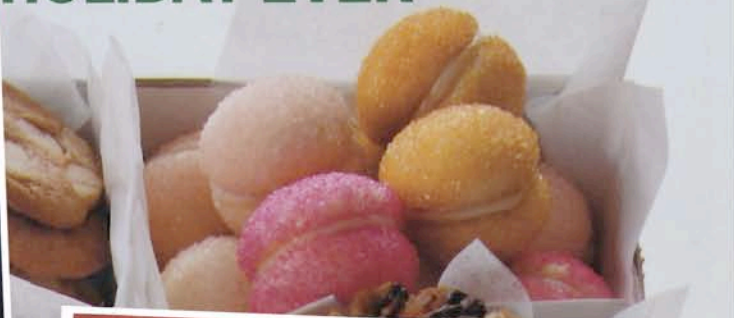
The caramel pecan roll at Hell's Kitchen is no delicate pastry. It's soft and yielding, just right to soak up plenty of sweet, buttery sauce.

### CIRCLES OF HEAVEN

If you have time for only one meal in Minneapolis or Duluth, we strongly urge you *not* to go to Hell's Kitchen, which has a location in each city. It is the best place in either town, among the great restaurants of the Midwest, and high on the list of our favorite places to eat anywhere. And that is why we caution you: Coming for just one meal will be insanely frustrating. There are too many outstanding things to eat. You will walk out yearning

## THREE SPECTACULAR MENUS

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Chef and co-owner Mitch Omer is apparently too hot for TV.

for the likes of hand-pulled corned beef hash, char-broiled pit ham, baked huevos rancheros, and a dozen other items for which there was no space on the table.

At breakfast, the caramel pecan roll is a necessity. Made from a recipe chef Mitch Omer credits to his father, it is a jumbo swirl of tender dough topped with caramel glaze and a spill of roasted pecans. The dough is not the gossamer, croissantlike stuff that makes many of the nation's top buns such delicate delicacies; rather, it is soft and yielding and, hence, more absorbent. That's the way you want it, because as soon as you press down with your fork edge, you begin to sop up the buttery caramel on your plate. As you draw the mouthful through the sauce, you need to gather up as many chunks of pecan as possible. The pieces are big enough to embody nutmeat luxury, and they are sprinkled with a few grains of coarse salt, which is where the magic is. The occasional ping of a salt crystal in a sea of sumptuous caramel gives the glaze vibrancy beyond anything that is purely sweet or salty.

Plowing into the roll scarcely leaves room to sample Mahanoinn porridge, a hot cereal made from wild rice, roasted hazelnuts, blueberries, and cranberries in a slurry of heavy cream and maple syrup. The rice is hand-parched by the Leech Lake Band and of Ojibwe, a process that results in pale grains with robust flavor. Omer got the idea for this dish from the journals of trappers who dined with Cree Indians in the 18th century. Did we mention lemon ribotta botekates that actually do melt in your mouth? Brioche bread pladdings with black currants and crème anglaise? *Rosti* mixed with smoked bacon, minced garlic, green onions, and chives? Shrimp-and-crab cake with a poached egg and red-pepper hollandaise? Lest the ambitious or unusual nature of these dishes give the impression that

Hell's Kitchen is a highfalutin restaurant, note that it opens Monday through Friday at 6:30 a.m. The blue-collar opening time reflects a sensibility that is less about status than quality and value. "No, we don't offer a \$3.99 all-you-can-eat breakfast," the menu warns, but most meals are under \$10, and the big caramel pecan roll is all of \$2.75.

As its name suggests, Hell's Kitchen has attitude. Omer, who opened in Minneapolis in 2002 with partner and fellow self-proclaimed "renegade chef" Steve Meyer, says that the New York City neighborhood was mostly the inspiration for the name, which also relates to how hot it is in a restaurant kitchen. The décor in the dining room is amusingly hellish: a fun-house toccata of black and red, the walls hung with dozens of sardonic illustrations by artist Ralph Steadman. Souvenir hoodies boast of "Damn Good Food." On the other hand, the restaurant's weekly Salvation Sundays feature live gospel music (and staff in pajamas). It's all in a spirit of swaggering mischief that wants to test propriety, and Omer is apparently countercultural enough that the Food Network wanted nothing to do with him when he auditioned to be on television. "I guess they gave me the brush because I am too old and too fat," laughs the former rock-band security guard, who stands about six and a half feet tall in high-heel western boots and is known for his salty vocabulary.

The more likely explanation is that Omer's cooking, like his promethean personality, is too difficult for television. For example, Hell's Kitchen peanut butter: Omer starts by roasting his own unskinned Spanish peanuts. They are rugged-ground and then infused with clarified butter, salt, and touches of honey and brown sugar. The result is like no other peanut butter; especially good when spread across toasted slices of the bison-sausage bread he makes. Nuggets of Omer's sweet bison sausage are laced into a dark, grainy loaf with walnuts, currants, and an insomniacal measure of strong coffee.

It wasn't until 2007, when the second Hell's Kitchen opened, in Duluth, that we finally ate lunch at the restaurant we had come to know as Breakfast Mecca. The kitchen's gloss on a BLT is the WBLT, in which thin, parmesan-crusting Canadian walleye fillets add a welcoming outdoorsy panache to the usual mix, and lemon-scalion tartar sauce takes the place of mayonnaise. If you enjoy a sandwich of ham and cheese, how about smoked ham with melted Swiss and Fontina on grilled sourdough, sparkling with thin slices of poached pear? Macaroni-and-cheese devotees will swoon over penne in four-are sauce, baked until the seasoned bread crumbs on top are crisp and crunchy.

Mark Anderson, a longtime Duluth resident who runs the new Hell's Kitchen, told us that we needed to try a bison burger. We prefer cow to bison and were particularly reluctant when we read the menu's description: "Thirty percent leaner than skinless chicken." We wondered: How dry can a burger be? The black-crust half-pound patty arrived under a block of semi-melted Maytag blue cheese—a reminder that this is serious dairy country. But the truly wondrous thing was how drippy, spurdy, juicy-rich the burger was. Unbelievable, especially for lean bison. We had to ask Anderson why. "Butter," he answered. "We mix lots of butter into the ground meat."

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