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Valley and Skyline Sketches

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Valley and Skyline Sketches

Eating Outside: Its Pitfalls and Pleasures

Steve Fagin

Paddling hard down New York's East River a few years ago, more than halfway through the 28-mile Mayor's Cup kayak championship around Manhattan, I found myself battling not just other vessels and gnarly conditions through Hell Gate but gnawing hunger.



Steve Fagin enjoying a plate of black beans in style.

LISA BROWNELL

It was time to shove down the peanut butter and jelly sandwich that I had lashed onto the deck with bungee cords hours earlier at the start of the race on the Hudson River.

Just as I reached forward for my hasty meal, the wake from a passing barge washed over me, soaking the sandwich in grimy river water that had the color, odor, consistency, and probably, same chemical compounds as used in crankcase oil.

I may have hesitated a second or two, but I was so famished I crammed the sodden mess into my mouth and gulped it down whole, the same way a cormorant swallows a herring.

I wish I could say that was my worst outdoor dining experience. After two days of hiking Maine's

100-Mile Wilderness, I realized, to great consternation, that I had gobbled down more than half of my food, which was supposed to last a week. For the next several days I self-imposed strict rations, squirreling away the last PB&J sandwich I promised myself as a reward on the final day of the hike. I held off eating that sandwich until my last day. The bread was stale and squished, most of the jelly had dried up, and the peanut butter had congealed into a substance resembling wallpaper paste—but even *crème brûlée* served at L'Épicure in Paris could not have been more delectable.

Hunger, of course, enhances the enjoyment of any meal, but during the COVID-19 pandemic, I found that my family and I enjoyed our best home-cooked meals—produce from our garden, meals made with my own maple syrup, and outdoor pizza—outside on the deck I built overlooking a steep hill above Long Pond in Ledyard, Connecticut.

Food tastes better in fresh air. I think of a harvest dinner friends prepared and served outside by a lake in Maine. It was a savory casserole of vegetables just plucked from their garden. Every component exploded in flavor. “What is this wondrous, tasty morsel?” I asked, holding up my fork I’d speared into a tender, round thing.

“A potato,” the hostess replied.

My mouth waters remembering a picnic in the Alpine Garden below the summit of New Hampshire’s Mount Washington. The meal wasn’t lavish, but elegantly simple: salad containing apples, currants, cashews, and celery, topped with balsamic vinaigrette; wheel of Edam cheese; jar of kalamata olive tapenade; and loaf of sourdough bread.

I once spent a couple weeks tramping through the Swiss Alps, subsisting entirely on a jar of cherry preserves and an enormous loaf of a dense, dark, hard-crust bread called walliser rogggenbrot that started out as big as my sleeping bag but by the last day had been reduced to the size of a golf ball.

Oh, wait, I almost forgot: every ten kilometers or so the trails passed an outdoor café, and each afternoon I treated myself to the same lunch: a cheese omelet and tomato salad. I have yet to consume either dish with such gusto and bliss as I did then.

As for the bread, since that excursion I’ve visited numerous bakeries and have yet to sample any loaf as heavenly as that walliser rogggenbrot. Sigh.

Having a cook along on a hike is a luxury I enjoyed on only one other mountaineering expedition—in the Andes.

The day before we departed from a hotel in bustling Santiago, Chile, to a remote trailhead on the Argentine border, five of us, including the guide,

went on a supermarket shopping spree for three weeks of food. Because mules would be carrying supplies for the first week's journey to Base Camp at 13,000 feet, we didn't skimp, loading up on canned goods, fresh fruit, and other bulky provisions. The mountain of provender we purchased seemed as tall as Aconcagua, the 22,841-foot peak we would be attempting to scale.

After Base Camp, the mules departed, and all that food had to be lugged on our backs in increasingly steep stages, marked by higher winds, lower temperatures, and deeper snow. By the time I hit 20,000 feet, I was too wiped out to trudge another step.

Since then, I have been particularly mindful about pack weight. More of a gourmand than a gourmet, and also frugal, I also resist buying high-priced, freeze-dried backpacking meals. On overnight hikes I'm quite content to subsist on oatmeal for breakfast, gorp for lunch, and couscous for dinner.

You don't have to be in the Alps, Andes, Himalaya, or Appalachians to partake in outdoor dining. You don't even have to be camping.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, before we were fully vaccinated and until winter drove us back indoors, my family and I ate most of our dinners out on the deck. Now that the virus has subsided, we still like to take our plates outside. A chorus of songbirds enhances mealtime conversation as well as flavors.

As for cooking outside, for decades I used an ancient Svea stove until I almost burned down a shelter near Pinkham Notch trying to prime it.

Back at home, I've never owned a gas grill or gotten into barbecuing, but I did help build an outdoor pizza/bread oven out of fieldstone. It takes about ten hours to heat up, so is somewhat limited in use.

Making maple syrup for friends, an annual culinary celebration, involves even more preparation—probably as much effort as it takes to host a state dinner at the White House.

In late February, when nighttime temperatures dip below freezing and climb with the sun, the sap also rises. That's when I get busy, drilling fresh holes in maple trees, pounding in taps, and connecting plastic tubes to buckets.

Those first few drops of clear liquid drip represent a recurring miracle: Spring approaches! Life renewed!

For the next few weeks, I make daily rounds—sometimes wearing snowshoes—to transfer sap collected from individual buckets into a couple of 35-gallon containers (it takes 40 gallons of sap to produce one gallon of syrup). If there's snow on the ground, I shovel it around the containers to keep the sap from spoiling; otherwise, I freeze water jugs and toss them in.

I also start heaping firewood near a stone firepit, upon which rests a salvaged section of wrought-iron fence that serves as a grate.

Finally, on the big day, I start the fire about 6 A.M., fill pots with sap, cover them with metal screens to keep out falling ashes, and start boiling.

About eight hours later, when guests arrive, what began as clear, tasteless sap transforms into rich, dark, sweet syrup.

Then, using a cast-iron skillet over the same fire, I griddle pancakes and top them with hot syrup. Ambrosia!

—Steve Fagin

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The Summer Before the Storm

Liana Tsang Cohen

A bellow came from deep in the Tongass National Forest, ricocheting off the trees.

“Back-cut!”

There was a final roar of protest as the chain saw’s teeth met bark, and tan wood chips flew like sparks. Standing a few tree lengths away, I flinched as the Sitka spruce pitched over with a mighty crack, as if the effort to fall were greater than what it took to remain standing all those years.

“All clear!”

Moments later, 24-year old Jase Tweedy appeared, grinning widely behind his reddish-blond beard and clear safety goggles. The chain saw sputtered and quieted into a hum as he readjusted his orange ear plugs, known as “ear pro,” then carved the



Windfall Lake Cabin, where the crew rested and ate, overlooks the water. U.S. FOREST SERVICE

hewn tree into sills, shaped like halved cross-sections. Jase set the machine aside and, together, we placed the wooden half-domes along a muddy section of the Windfall Lake Trail. Next, we measured the trail level with a clinometer and a long, flat ruler; the sills would constitute the base of an elevated walkway, so they needed to form a perfectly straight line.

We were kneeling in the mud when we heard a loud whoop. Andres Santiago Velez, Jase's trails colleague, and Matt Adams, the crew leader, emerged around the bend, hauling a milled plank. The four of us had spent the morning scraping chestnut-colored bark off a thick western hemlock to ward away rotting, a hazard for both trail and hiker. From there, Matt and Andres had sliced the tree, newly pale and smooth, into boards, while Jase and I toppled smaller targets farther down the path.

I stood off to the side, crushing fallen blueberries under my boots as the three men struggled to lift the cumbersome plank onto the sills. Succeeding at last, they joined the walkway and base together with screws. Jase stepped onto the sturdy trail, spreading his arms to the sky triumphantly, as if atop a mountain.

It was August 2019, and Matt, Jase, and Andres were trail workers for the U.S. Forest Service in Juneau, Alaska. They, along with crews from the Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation, the City and Borough of Juneau, and a local nonprofit called Trail Mix, split the work of maintaining the city's 250 miles of trails, a subset of which form part of the National Trails System. Their work is necessary in Alaska's southeast region, where rain or snow falls on 222 out of 365 days a year, on average. When the rains come, the rivers swell, the muskeg wilts, and the walking paths smudge into near nonexistence—as was the case that summer on portions of the Windfall Lake Trail following recent storms. I, a registered volunteer and tentative journalist, was tagging along, trying to be useful.

In the late afternoon, we stored tools under a blue tarp and hiked to the end of the trail, where a tiny cabin overlooks the spectacular lake for which the path is named. The crew was on an eight-day "hitch," during which they lived near the worksite to save time; it was hard to imagine a better location for a backcountry stay. A short dock for rowboats split the glassy water below the porch, and beyond that, the lake was silky and unblemished, telling of the sky, trees, and mountains that encircled it for miles. Jase and Andres dropped their packs and made a beeline for the water, despite the high-40s air temperature. I stood on the deck with Matt, a seasoned leader in his 30s who grew up in Portland, Oregon, before relocating to Alaska.

Matt chuckled as Jase and Andres flipped and turned in the water like seals. “They’re young,” he said, shrugging. “Alaska is still exciting for them.”

When the sun flickered over the horizon, tinging the mountains in gold, we prepared dinner together. I sat with Jase in the cabin, slicing green peppers and onions for the tacos. He was a little too lanky for the cramped bench, shoulders tucking inward as he drew the knife back and forth over the cutting board. He tapped his foot as he chopped.

Originally from Steamboat Springs, Colorado, Jase graduated from California Polytechnic State University in 2017. He began his undergraduate career as an engineer because he always had an affinity for “building things,” but later switched to forestry and natural resources, with a minor in indigenous cultures. The courses for his major were a mixed bag: Some held a dated focus on economics, with such topics as clear-cutting and other forms of logging, and others looked at forest management from a symbiotic perspective, teaching techniques for improving the overall health of the environment. At that time, Jase and a group of his friends lived in a six-bedroom house where every Wednesday they held craft nights for as many as 60 people. He said the place became a kind of commune. In 2015, he had his first experience as a USFS employee in Colorado, where he was part of a timber preparation crew. After graduating, Jase worked at a ski resort for a while, and then at the front desk of a hostel in Thailand. Eventually, he found his way back to the USFS, this time doing trail work in Alaska.

Transitioning from timber prep to trail crew fulfilled him. He glanced out the window, grinning. “This is worth taxpayer dollars.”

Andres’s journey to trail work was more circuitous than Jase’s. Born in Oakland, California, he never felt at home amid the traffic and fumes of the city. He attended the University of California, Santa Barbara, but dropped out a year later after getting overly involved in “the party scene.” From there, he hopped from place to place—Cuba, Mexico, Washington, Alaska, Spain, Arizona, Colorado, Montana, and, finally, back to Alaska—hardly returning home for more than two months at a time. With each new location, he gained additional experience and varied adventures: working, first on the “slime line” and later as filleter, at a fish processing plant in Anchorage; building a plane runway for a man’s backcountry wilderness cabin in Yukon Territory (at great risk, in hindsight); removing trees with the Arizona Conservation Corps; becoming increasingly involved in conservation work. Finally, at the end of a six-month period as a trail crew leader in Montana, he spotted the listing to join a USFS crew in Juneau for a season.

He took it, even though his girlfriend chose to remain in Montana fighting forest fires.

“And why come to Alaska originally?” I couldn’t help but ask, wanting to know the magic of a place to which he couldn’t help but return, even if it meant being alone. We were sitting at the same wooden table in the cabin where Jase and I had chopped vegetables the day before. The sun was so low that Andres’s side was almost completely obscured in shadows. I could hardly see his face, but I heard the sheepish smile in his voice.

“Well,” he began hesitantly, “I was really into the movie *Into the Wild* . . .”

Behind me on the bottom bunk, Matt burst into laughter, the bounce of his shoulders nearly shaking the bandana off his head. Andres joined in, as if the wisdom he’d accumulated since then explained why this was so funny. Seeing my confused look, Andres said that many Alaskans hate that movie.

“It convinces young folks to come to Alaska and do something stupid,” Matt added.

“Like trying to get to the bus,” Andres chuckled, referring to the abandoned bus where Christopher McCandless, whose story was immortalized in Jon Krakauer’s bestselling book, *Into the Wild*, took his last breaths (the bus has since been removed from the rugged Stampede Trail in Alaska). “Anyway, not the best reason.”

Despite the questionable impetus behind his initial trip to Alaska, though, the pull of other places on Andres was beginning to weaken. Having now worked a seasonal position for the USFS, he would receive hiring preference next year; after four terms, he’d become eligible to compete for permanent opportunities, a wider range than temporary ones. At 28, he was warming to the idea of a steady job and a place to call home. He was open to a number of more long-term roles—a permanent seasonal trail crew leader, a stewardship position, a supervisor with a conservation corps. Most people can only bounce for so long.

Andres is not alone in his fatigue. The life of a temporary federal worker means resuming the job hunt every six months and never having one’s labor count toward federal retirement programs (although a bill introduced recently could change that). Yet the government relies on a nonpermanent workforce to alter the size of its employee pool based on fluctuating budget levels. Back in 1994, in response to pushes for long-term temporary workers to gain pathways to permanent employment, the federal government established a rule limiting the hours a seasonal employee can work in one year to 1,039. Ironically, the new rule—which the National Park Service did not fully

follow until after an audit in 2018—made things worse. Intending to increase the number of permanent positions without issuing any additional funding, it incentivized agencies to keep many jobs temporary—and strictly limited the hours a worker can complete in a year.

“In the private sector, you could be laid off at any moment, but getting the boot isn’t associated with hitting this magical number of 1039,” Mike Dilger, the recreation and resources planner in Juneau’s USFS office, told me, exasperated. “I don’t think anything good came out of that change.”

Even more so than before, the rule created a workforce that is always on the move. With the 1,039 workable hours up within six months, temporary laborers have no choice but to restart in a different location, unless they are willing and able to get a nonfederal position in the same area. Without job security, or even the guarantee of staying in the community for the rest of the year, accumulating assets becomes a struggle and home ownership can remain elusive. It’s difficult to put down roots.

For the young adventurer, however, this chance to consistently start anew elicits a thrill. When I asked Jase, only four years younger than Andres, how he felt about permanent employment, he shrugged noncommittally. His post-season plan was far more interesting: backpacking in Thailand until money runs low, then applying to more trail gigs.

But whether its fleetingness appeals or detracts, trail work is the kind of job some can’t imagine not doing.

At one point in my conversation with Andres, the sun made a rare appearance through Juneau’s usual wall of gray, entering the room in the form of a golden sheet dappled with dust. For a moment, he was visible, relaxed against the cabin wall, his green eyes looking contented.

“Why trail work?” I asked. The question hung awkwardly—my lack of journalistic prowess apparent, at least to my ears—but I genuinely wanted to know.

“At its core,” Andres replied slowly, nodding as if to dislodge the correct words from within, “I think it’s a little selfish.”

He learned as a young adult that proximity to recreational trails, for running and mountain biking, was deeply important to him. When he was 18, he spent a week in a psychiatric facility, where they prescribed medication and confined him to a space within four walls. Afterward, he went to work at a little restaurant in the Sierra Nevada mountains, in a town with only 200 people. Nestled among alpine lakes, giant trees, and sloping mountains, he ceased his medication, got in better shape, felt stronger and healthier. He

decided then that going back to Oakland wasn't an option. Quite simply, he said, "I needed to be close to the things that made me better."

That summer—as is always the case in our wild places—the fate of the forest around us was in limbo. Former President Donald Trump had exempted the Tongass from the federal roadless rule, which would open more than half of the Tongass to logging and road development. Now, for the Tongass National Forest and its counterparts, the tides are turning, slowly. In June 2021, the USFS announced it would revisit that decision.

That summer, we, too, were in limbo. Andres, uncertain where late autumn would find him. Jase, always roaming, searching for something he didn't quite know. Me, on the verge of my senior year of college, waiting to see which direction my life would take. All of us, blissfully unaware of the encroaching global pandemic. We were all lost in some way; the trail anchored us in the storm.

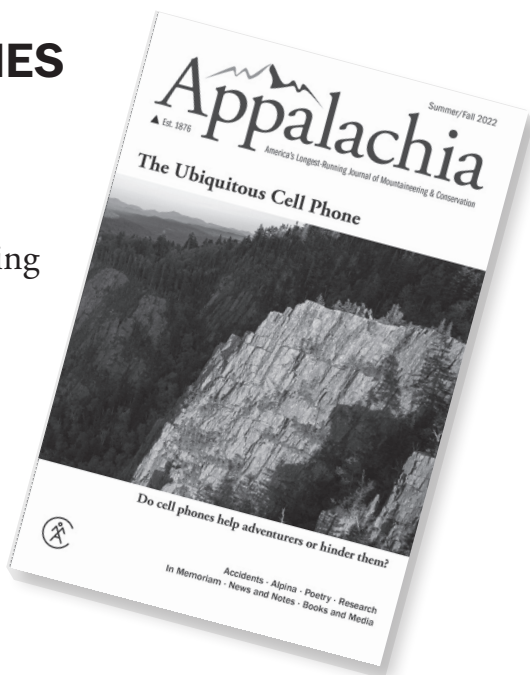
LIANA TSANG COHEN is a writer from New York City who lives in Los Angeles. A graduate of Princeton University, she works in film development. Her writing has appeared in *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *Nightingale & Sparrow*, and *The Nassau Literary Review*. She spends her time re-reading young-adult novels, hiking with her dogs, and refusing to throw anything away.

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