

Just about every location in Oak Creek Canyon comes with history. And some pages read as colorfully as the red-rock cliffs that rise hundreds of feet above the trout-stocked Oak Creek. Garland's Oak Creek Lodge is one such spot. The log and river rock cabin built in 1908 on Crookneck Flat houses one of the most celebrated kitchens and dining rooms in the state that has had some of the most creative, and interesting, people and characters working it.

Jess Howard built the cabin with logs hand-hewn from the canyon's Ponderosa pines. The historic infamy doesn't rest on his shoulders, however, but his father Jesse's. Jesse, a.k.a. Bear, Howard, exceptionally tall and muscled with a mountain man's edge and hardly a fearful bone in his body, had a tawdry past that included a stint for murder at San Quentin. When he settled in Oak Creek Canyon, he took to fishing and hunting game. Especially bear.

Bear Howard homesteaded the intensely primordial West Fork of Oak Creek. Here he walked the stream that to this day retains the kind of wildness that can appease even the most restless soul such as Bear Howard's. Scientists long recognized the canyon's importance as an impeccable example of a natural ecosystem, and the federal government designated its lower six miles as a Research Natural Area in 1931. The area

starts near the mouth of the West Fork to an unnamed drainage about six miles upstream where the creek waters disappear underground.



Despite protective measures, the charismatic canyon, which author Zane Grey described in his West Fork-inspired book, *Call of the Canyon*, as having "strange, wild, magnificent ruggedness and beauty;" became the darling of the Sedona area. The West Fork Trail became, and remains, the most popular hike.

The younger Howard, a lifelong bachelor, who worked the mines in Superior, retired in Oak Creek Canyon. He lived in the cabin now Garland's kitchen until he died in 1923. The homestead changed hands once before Frank and Catherine Todd bought it in 1928. The Todds turned it into a lodge a few years later, which evolved into a cluster of cabins. Their friends, Bill and Georgiana Garland, bought the lodge in 1972.

The location, magical and mystical enough to transport visitors several notches into serenity, was part of the reason people came repeatedly to the lodge. Georgiana and daughter, Susan, Garland's cooking was the other. After Susan went to La Varenne cooking school in Paris in 1976, the Lodge's reputation for good meals elevated to excellent. And word spread. When Susan married and moved to the Big Island of Hawaii in 1980, another wedding serendipitously provided the next chef.

Amanda Stine worked in Scottsdale catering for C. Steele and Company when she attended the same wedding at which the Garlands were also guests. She'd read about the Garland's Oak Creek Lodge in one of *Food & Wine* magazine's early issues. Mary and Gary Garland followed the locavore leading of Alice Waters and her Chef Panisse, and to Chef Amanda, a fellow Waters devotee, "It truly did look like a great place." At the wedding, she told Gary Garland she was interested in working at the Lodge. Her interest prompted an offer, and the relationship turned into mutual admiration society that has lasted for more than 25 years.

When Chef Amanda contracted a life-threatening case of pneumonia, owner Mary Garland described the kitchen as wobbling along like a bent wheel. After Chef Amanda awoke from a three-week coma, the first words she spoke to Mary, ever so faintly but forcefully, were, "Don't give my job away. It's what I love to do." When Chef Amanda recovered several months later, the kitchen did, too.

"It's good for people to develop and make their own condiments, such as sauces, rubs and marinades. For one thing, it saves money. You can buy these, but they come at a great cost. When you make your own, the dish develops from your own style. This is an important step. One you see the value and results from."



Pecan-crusted Rack of Lamb with Habanera Mint Jam, Chive and Garlic Roasted Fingerling Potatoes and Calabacetus (Garden Squash, Red Onion, Sweet Peppers and Corn)

Photographs - Top: a hiker under a cliff overhang along the West Fork of Oak Creek, **Bottom:** Zinnias in Garland's garden, **Opposite:** Chef Amanda Stine describes her Pecan Crusted Rack of Lamb.

*... from the garden to the table
the earth imparts its flavor to the food and
Chef Stine combines these flavors
in unforgettable creations*



GARLAND'S GARDEN
(Mario Valeruz, gardener)

Located on a bench just above the kitchen and dining room cabin, the Garland's garden grows below Sedona's trademark red-rock cliffs. The sweet smell of Arizona sycamore trees that line the creek below wafts up along the short walk to the flat. Once the road emerges from the riparian forest biome onto the sundrenched bench, every one of the senses gets stimulated.

The air, humid from irrigation, holds the pungent fragrance of chlorophyll. Robins lift a song as they poke around the rich layers of worm-infested mulch packed upon the ground beneath each row of plants, then show off their booty worms dangling from their beaks. Other birds toss their melodies into the Edenic air while scanning for insects. Bees buzz around colorful rows of wildflowers – bachelor button, marigold, and sunflowers. Later, the birds will nibble the flowers' seeds. The more flowers the garden has, the more diversity in pollinators it attracts and the more chance the vegetables and fruit trees have to get pollinated.

"When you have birds singing," explained Mario Valeruz, gardener for the last 23 years, "the melody stimulates the plants to grow. When I learned monarch butterflies like dill, I planted more to get more diversity in pollinators."

Valeruz learned this information – maybe more lore than science – from reading up on the latest techniques for gardening gathered from cultures from around the planet. If the avian arias don't necessarily work, soil testing will. Valeruz used to add nutrients by guessing. Nowadays, he uses natural elements measured by scientific testing.

"I'm currently into soil testing," Valeruz said. "I believe soil is like your body. When it's balanced, things grow easily. I add micronutrients and organic potassium, which the soil in the area generally lacks. If everyone ate foods that came from balanced soil, they wouldn't need vitamins."

"You can taste when the soil is unbalanced," Valeruz continued. "For instance, over using manure creates too much phosphorus, which adds a bitter taste. A lot of foods are grown for shipping. The food might not taste good, but it holds up great during shipping. But local foods are grown for flavor, not shipping."

The whole canyon once had gardens growing up and down it, planted first by the Apache, then by the pioneers. Most of the hiking trails in the upper canyon follow pathways forged by the pioneers. The paths head straight up the canyon walls where the homesteaders had wagons parked on the rim. The pioneers would hand-haul crops, which often took several trips, up to the wagons, and then travel three days to Flagstaff to sell the crops.



Valeruz plucks a sunny yellow grape-sized tomato, his favorite and sweet as can be, and pops it into his mouth as he strolls along an avenue of other tomatoes – some green and others just starting to ripen with a ruddy hue. No need to wash the fruit, he advised, since the sun sterilizes things just fine. Then he talks about the five different species of garlic he grows. The bulbs ripen at different times of the season and have various uses.

“Garlic is juicy and sweet when it’s picked fresh off the vine,” Valeruz said. “Often what you get in the store is five or more months old and dry.”

Garland’s garden went totally organic around 2000. More and more different bugs have showed up since Valeruz stopped spraying with chemicals. This makes for what he calls a “full-spectrum” garden that’s more lively and alive with nature. Instead of chemicals, he uses a compost tea to fight one noisome nuisance, powdery mildew. Made of seaweed and molasses, the resultant brew stages a biological warfare with the fungus.

“Our apple trees took three years to transition from chemicals to organic methods,” Valeruz said. “Now the fruit is juicier and bigger. When I measure them on a Brix meter – this measures the vitality of the fruit and the sugar and minerals of the plant – they’re Brixed out. I get the high reading, which for apples is 18.”

When the boughs of the apple trees start to hang heavy with fruit, Valeruz picks enough apples to thin the load. Plus, a tree has just so much energy. Too much fruit won’t make a good harvest. Once the fruit ripens, he must treat it gently.

“The fruit is delicate and bruises easily,” Valeruz said. “I can only put so many pieces in a bucket. But it’s incredible – cinnamon-flavored and juicy.”

Meanwhile, inside the kitchen . . .

All eggs are graded large . . . All butter is unsalted . . . All juices are freshly squeezed . . . We use only pure vanilla, almond, lemon, orange and other flavoring extract . . . they are worth the price . . . We use extra virgin olive oil, pure olive oil, canola oil and pure walnut and hazelnut oils . . . We like olive oil for higher heat sautéing and extra virgin in dressings and seasoning where heat is not a factor.

(Excerpts from Sharing the Table at Garland’s Lodge, Amanda Stine and Mary Garland, Third printing 2008)

Chef Amanda Stine, a self-taught foodie with a penchant for soulful flavors from her mother’s Louisiana and New Mexico heritage, gets her ideas from books and magazines.

“I read a lot,” Chef Amanda said. “I think food begets itself. Going to the grocery store is relaxing to me and I get a lot of ideas there. I like to go at night.”

Many of the ingredients Chef Amanda uses lie right outside the door of the old Howard cabin – fruits and vegetables from the lodge’s garden, fruit from the streamside tangles of Himalayan berry bushes brought to the canyon by the pioneers, or mushrooms gathered in the forest after the monsoons start (bolete and lobster) or after prescribed or natural burns (chanterelle and morels). What she does with the food is what draws continual kudos and thank-yous from guests. Though she went to the Culinary Institute in Hyde Park for pastry arts and “loves to make pies and breads,” Chef Amanda believes her sauces, another love, make the meals. One example of how sauces can make or break a dish is the Rack of Lamb served at the lodge. The lodge favorite, which features Chef Amanda’s “great little sauces,” and different rubs has converted many a childhood lamb-hater.

“Lamb used to be pretty gamey,” Chef Amanda explained, “but today’s lamb is sweeter and more digestible. It’s superior meat. We used to do quail, but we can’t these days. People have them in their back yard and don’t want to eat them.”

Chef’s Recipe



GARLAND’S APPLE PIE

(Serves 10 to 12)

There’s a tie for the number pie at Garland’s. In the spring it’s Strawberry-Rhubarb. In autumn, apple is king. And the organic apple trees produce some of the tastiest apples.

	Pastry for double-crust pie (recipe below)
1 tsp	Cinnamon (ground)
1/2 tsp	Nutmeg (ground)
1/3 cup	Cornstarch
1–1/4 cups	Sugar
6– to 7 cups	Apples (Granny Smith or Fuji); approximately 6 medium-large apples, peeled, cored, and sliced
2 tsp	Vanilla extract
2 Tbsps	Cold butter, cut into bits

Make the pie pastry and allow it to chill in the refrigerator while preparing the fruit filling. Preheat the oven to 400 degrees.

Mix the spices, cornstarch, and sugar. Add the apples and vanilla, and toss to combine.

Roll out one disk of pastry and fit into a 10-inch pie pan. Pour the filling into the pastry shell and dot with butter. Roll out the top crust, and then lay over the fruit. Trim and crimp the edges lightly.

Make four 1-inch slices in the top crust, sort of “north, south, east and west,” to release steam while baking, and sprinkle the top of the pie evenly with a few teaspoonfuls of sugar.

Bake at 400 degrees for 10 minutes, and then lower the oven temperature to 350 degrees and bake 40 minutes more, or until golden brown.

PASTRY FOR DOUBLE-CRUST PIE

3 cups	All purpose unbleached flour
1 tsp	Salt
2 Tbsps	Sugar
12 Tbsps	Unsalted butter; cut into bits (6 oz or 1-1/2 sticks)
10 Tbsps	Vegetable shortening
1/4 cup	Cold water
1 Tbsp	Cider vinegar

Combine dry ingredients in a medium bowl, and whisk lightly to blend.

Add butter and shortening, toss lightly to just coat the pieces, and then cut in with a pastry cutter until mixture appears like a very coarse meal. Some fat pieces will look like small beans.

Mix water and vinegar together, and then sprinkle about 3 tablespoons over the mixture, toss together to blend. Add another tablespoon, toss together to form a ball. You may need more water to have this come together into a cohesive ball, just add a tablespoon more at a time. Your dough should hold together when pressed, and it’s better to not have it too dry.

Form into 2 balls, flatten the balls into fattish discs, wrap and chill at least 2 hours. This is necessary to rest and relax the gluten in the flour and completely chill all the fats in the mixture.

COOK’S TIPS: Shortening gives the crust flakiness and handling ability. Chef Amanda prefers leaf lard with butter, but vegetarians or people with special dietary needs should use shortening. Crisco has a “no trans fat” version. Chef Amanda reports, “It works just fine” when she tested it. You can use all butter, which produces a rich, melt-in-your-mouth type of crust.

You can substitute 3 cups of strawberries, sliced and 3 cups rhubarb, sliced (about 4 stalks), omit the cinnamon and nutmeg, and add 1/4 teaspoon of almond extract to make the Chef Amanda’s spring favorite, Strawberry Rhubarb Pie.