



## The tastemaker

### To make your restaurant meal memorable, Dave Nigh goes to extraordinary lengths

by [Matthew Schniper](#)

This past October, *Bon Appétit* named Boulder **America's Foodiest Town** of 2010.

The criteria by which the magazine judged its award were "quality farmers' markets, concerned farmers, dedicated food media, first-rate restaurants, talented food artisans, and a community of food lovers."

Forget for a moment that Colorado Springs wouldn't qualify for this award based on its size. (Competition was limited to cities of fewer than 250,000 people.) You could easily cite our recent farmers market accessions, politically active growers and ranchers, high-caliber eateries and bevy of Yelpers, wine snobs, green chile crazies and craft beer freaks to argue at least our viability in foodie competition. Not to mention positive scene indicators like the four new breweries opening recently (and two more on the horizon); four new spice shops appearing; two new gourmet, tapas-driven ventures; and a specialty olive oil and vinegar market.

Are we bitter? Certainly not. Jealous? Maybe a little. Boulder's accolades inspire some of us to ask what it would take for this area to one day earn similar gustatory acclaim, and the prestige, tourism and, of course, great meals to come with it.

As explained by **Dave Nigh**, co-owner of **Extraordinary Ingredients** gourmet pantry, at least part of it is decidedly simple, perhaps even a little ... dull.

"Food is all about distribution," Nigh says. "What chefs want is *what* they want, *when* they want it."

Nigh should know; most of Boulder's fine eateries are clients of Denver-based Nigh Imports.

"Obviously his product isn't *the* reason [Boulder won]," says Extraordinary Ingredients co-owner **Kerri Olivier**. "But the fact that those restaurants are so excellent and discriminating and buy from him is a statement ... **Mateo, the Kitchen, Café Aion** —[that article] is like a tour of his customers."

For the better part of the past decade, Nigh has outfitted up to 110 culinarians mostly between Boulder and Denver, but also in Colorado Springs. He either currently services or has serviced 10 of the top 20 restaurants in Colorado, as determined by **Zagat Survey's America's Top Restaurants 2011** guide.

His clientele, currently a corps of 44, includes upscale eateries like **Elway's** — of which one of its two locations won *Westword's* Best High-End Steakhouse award for 2010 — and Jax Fish House Boulder, home of *Top Chef: New York Season 5* winner **Hosea Rosenberg**. Locally, he delivers rare items like fennel pollen and espresso sea salt to fine dining outfits like the Cliff House, the Blue Star and Margarita at PineCreek.

"This is all really chef-driven," says Nigh. "We're extremely selective about who we choose to work with. This isn't about one-time sales, it's a relationship."

That said, the sandy-haired, square-jawed 51-year-old is looking for some new partners with whom to spice things up. He's even got a new pad to bring them to, here in town. It all bodes well for Colorado Springs restaurants — and anyone who believes in life after steak and potatoes.

## Touchdowns and tamarind

While Olivier will continue to run the gourmet pantry, Nigh has brought longtime Colorado Springs chef Francis Schott into the fold as majority owner of Extraordinary Ingredients Co-op, a new, wholesale arm of Nigh Imports. Together, they're eyeing expansion locally and further into southern Colorado, enabling a whole new array of outfits to gain access to Nigh's goods.

The co-op's physical location is an unassuming retail-front-turned-warehouse near the defunct dog track on North Nevada Avenue. There's no signage outside, but inside, there's a newly installed, massive walk-in cooler, rows of shelving units that hold dry goods and a packaging "clean room," basically a sterile space with a long table, various containers and several scales.

It's as sexy as canned peas. But that's OK, because the heart of the job is out in the field.

Nigh and Schott spend most of their days driving between clients and lugging product into kitchens: sacks of grains carried like sandbags to a flood wall, boxes stacked from waist to chin, a 16-gallon, 160-pound drum of olive oil heaved impressively over Nigh's shoulder.

On one afternoon in mid-October, I join them in Nigh's loaded-down, silver Dodge Ram to run the Springs route. Departing from the warehouse, we drop some Denver-made specialty candies at the pantry downtown, then head to see Pete Moreno at MacKenzie's Chop House.

In the subterranean kitchen, Nigh and Schott unload a couple small boxes and launch into college football chatter with Moreno. Then Nigh produces a jar of tamarind concentrate to lure the chef away from a large strip loin he's meticulously trimming. We all dip fingertips into the dark, inky syrup and give it a try, struggling not to pucker from the tartness.

This is the first of a handful of samplings during our 11 stops, and Nigh tells Moreno to keep the jar, play with it, and let him

know his impressions. Moreno later tells me by phone that it was one of the best tamarind concentrates he's tried, and that he'll probably buy and use it for marinating proteins like shrimp and steak. He's generally been using fresh tamarind on occasion, which is much more time-consuming.

Moreno, 35, has worked with Nigh at multiple stops in his kitchen career. "For the longest time when I was at La Petite Maison, he was the only one who could get me Piment d'Espelette," Moreno says of the smoky, paprika-like pepper from Southern France common to Basque cuisine. He recalls Nigh "bringing all kinds of crazy stuff" to him before that, while Moreno worked at the Blue Star. In fact, he purchased olive oil from Nigh 10 years ago while at Primitivo, back when Nigh got his start.

## The spice man cometh

Inspiration came for Nigh, a father of three boys and former forestry professional, when he returned from a vacation in Greece in 1999 with several bottles of olive oil. He shared some with friends in restaurants, who were impressed with its quality. The olive oil market was ballooning at the time, and Nigh felt an entrepreneurial tug; he began importing it and quickly developed nearly 50 clients in Denver, including the Colorado Convention Center and Mile High Stadium.

He hadn't been in that business long when the attacks of Sept. 11 occurred. Nigh had a link to the disaster in New York City; at the time, he was waiting on an insurance claim on some damaged product that he'd filed with an Israeli company located in the World Trade Center. Everyone at the company perished.

"It took me six months to figure out whether I should even say anything," Nigh says. But meanwhile, 30,000 Italian bottles sat empty at his warehouse, and the vulnerability of a single-item product line became apparent.

Had he still been in his youth, Nigh says, he would have signed up to go to war. Instead, he went to work. He "evolved" his wholesale food service business to focus on bringing chefs a diverse line of quality imports.

"I had to figure out, 'What's real now?' he says. "It put things in perspective for me." Speculating on 9/11's impact on the American mindset and marketplace, the Kansas native gauged that people would continue patronizing restaurants just as they always had.

Within the past 10 years, he's expanded to 14 product lines, including dried fruits, exotic peppers, sugars and grains. His passion for the work has consumed him: He's put in 60-hour weeks for much of the last 10 years, and his commitment contributed to the 2008 dissolution of his marriage. Still, he considers throwing himself in to this business one of the best decisions he's ever made.

Take the example of a trip to Turkey: When the Euro made Greek olive oil prohibitively expensive in 2002, Nigh went looking for a new source. With the help of Elway's chef Tyler Wiard, he sampled 30-plus oils, then scheduled a trip to further test the top seven of the batch.

It was October, during Ramadan, and also olive harvesting time. Nigh became entranced watching migrant workers picking olives, working sunup to sundown, crawling on their knees to grab every last fallen olive. He was in tears. Though he'd planned to visit one farm for a day, he ended up staying for a week and helping in the harvest.

On the second day of picking, his fingertips began bleeding from thin needles in the grass. One of the women, observing his hands, walked over and gave him her gloves. This is someone making less than \$10 a day, doing grueling work, someone to whom he probably should have been just another wealthy foreigner. Nigh says it's the most touching and humbling thing he's ever experienced.

When he and Wiard returned home to Denver, they parted ways with Wiard promising never to waste another drop of olive oil again. That's the power of knowing where your food truly comes from.

Experiences like this inform Nigh's dealings with chefs. In fact, he brought them photos from that journey and shared his story. His holistic interest in, and wholesale devotion to, his foods helps explain why Nigh has earned their business — and their trust.

Eric Viedt, chef at the Margarita at PineCreek, recalls a period roughly seven years ago when Nigh's enthusiasm started a minor craze over sumac, a tart, lemony, Middle Eastern spice. "All of a sudden," Viedt says, "everyone locally was using it."

## Giving it a Schott

Around 500 years ago, various spices were valued higher than gold. In the interest of flavors and scents, new maritime routes and civilizations were discovered, wars were fought, and empires were both forged and felled.

Sure, armies aren't marching in the name of truffle salt today, but chefs go gonzo for rare ingredients — not just spices, but gourmet dried goods, oils, vinegars, infusions and well-raised vegetables, fruits and proteins. Behind your great meal and the creative minds that design it lie the products themselves, those uncomposed notes of music, the raw materials. If they're subpar, likely the dish will follow suit. You can't build a Ferrari with Fiat parts.

Schott knows this as well as anyone. Currently a part-time knife-for-hire, his résumé includes leadership roles at the Craftwood Inn, The Broadmoor, Garden of the Gods Club and Glen Eyrie Conference Center. He's helped launch the careers of guys like Chip Johnson, currently of the Warehouse; longtime Craftwood head Jeff Knight; and the Stagecoach Inn's chef Bob Swain.

Moreno, now of MacKenzie's, found his first major mentor in Schott when, 15 years ago, they worked together at Chez Pierre, in what's now the FirstBank building downtown.

"He's one of the most humble guys you'll ever meet — that's one of the biggest things I learned from him amongst techniques and cooking," says Moreno. "He's helping me grow still — still imparting his ideas."

During my day with the guys, the squat, mustachioed Schott tells me that his mentees "hated me when they worked with me, but love me later." Not five minutes later, at Nosh, we run into a young prep cook whom Schott fired from the Craftwood several years ago. As if on cue, the kid pulls Schott half out of earshot to apologize, essentially for being young and cocky, and also to thank him for what he learned from him at the time.

Schott, 50, is able to forgive the follies of youth. Born to a poor family in New Jersey, he ran away at 14 and later wound up in the Navy. He still remembers scrubbing cutting boards at a corner meat market for pocket change, back when it would have been unthinkable that someday, he'd be able to send his daughter to a pricey, top-flight school like Colorado College.

Beyond the deep-rooted rapport with kitchen crews, Moreno views Schott's 35 years of experience behind the line (25 of them in town) as the greatest asset to the new co-op. "People might be a little nervous to try [a new item] if they don't really know the applications," Moreno says. "Where Francis knows the kitchen inside and out, he'd know how to make [the item] more approachable and break it down easier for people to understand."

None of this is to say Nigh lacks knowledge of the product line — it's just that Schott can take select items a step further. Beyond the trust, it's why Nigh courted him for roughly five years to launch this business extension together.

"I've always wanted to give back to what gave me a living," adds Schott. "This is the next phase of my life. I know how hard it is to do no holidays or weekends and 60-plus-hour weeks."

## Nuts and bolts

Nigh and Schott currently move approximately 150 tons of food and 25 tons of oils a year, working with five other importers such as Illinois-based Woodland Foods to source their products. Most of those products, by the way, are considered "all-natural" versus "organic," but Nigh places more concern on many items being Kosher, because that speaks more to supervision, cleanliness and how a product has been handled, he says.

"Dave's line is incredible and the quality is outstanding," says fellow distributor Dione Sears of Naturescape Microgreens, who sells her delicate garnishes to outfits like Adam's Mountain Café and Carlos' Bistro. "As an example of how fresh and viable they are, I've taken some of his products like peas, beans and amaranth and grown them in soil."

Nigh gladly acknowledges that he and Schott are "freaks about quality." But especially as the business expands, they have more than just fine ingredients to offer smaller, independent restaurant operations. They have advice.

Firstly, Schott says, "the big guys force bulk inventory." Chefs will buy larger quantities than they prefer, or items that they don't yet need, to meet minimum order sizes.

Account executive John Autry at Shamrock Foods confirms that his customers must meet a 15-case minimum before his company will dispatch a truck. Those cases could contain high-end lobster tails, a bundle of mop heads or large bags of spring mix, meaning that costs will range widely. But inevitably, they'll stack up in lower-volume outfits. So money that could otherwise earn interest in a bank account or pay off another bill gets tied up on a storage shelf.

Margarita at PineCreek chef Cathy Werle, a longtime Shamrock buyer who is generally pleased with the prices, says she'll sometimes purchase something like eight bottles of vinegar (for no significant discount) when she really just wants one. But with Nigh, she says, she can order as little as she wants as often as she prefers, down to a baggie of hazelnut flour.

With the new warehouse space, and cooperative buying, Nigh's customers can get access to manageable amounts of more products. Viedt, for one, is excited by the potential cooperative buying of products like seafood; he and leaders of other Independent Restaurant Cooperative member restaurants only briefly succeeded several years ago in doing something similar, with dairy items.

Extraordinary Ingredients will also help its customers set realistic pars to avoid excess inventory. "We know how much polenta they'll need on that menu cycle," says Nigh, who adds, "We also save them having to stress whether they'll get shorted." That's an unfortunate and reportedly frequent by-product of ordering through bigger companies.

Plus, as their own bosses, Nigh and Schott hold the power of negotiation. As an example, Nigh cites the cost of saffron, which has risen from \$20 an ounce three years ago to around \$130 an ounce today: "I'll even sell that at no markup to maintain it. We make decisions in the field, versus a big company. If Ben [Hoffer, at the Craftwood] says it's too expensive, I could drop the cost on the spot one week to help him out. That's a bond from years of business."

## Filling a niche

Brian Todd, president of the Food Institute, a New Jersey-based trade association and information service, says he doesn't believe that there's "anyone out there doing exactly what he's doing," after hearing a brief description of Nigh's business.

"He's relationship-building much more ... and it seems like he's supplementing what other suppliers are doing, which is somewhat unique. He's probably filling a niche that the bigger companies just aren't able to."

Jamey Fader, 2004 winner of *5280's* Chef of the Year award, has ascended from prep cook at Denver's Jax Fish House to co-creator of Lola and now culinary director of the entire Big Red F Restaurant Group in Denver. Along the way, he says, he hasn't worked with anyone else like Nigh.

"What I love is the fact that I deal with the owner of the company," Fader says. "In many cases, you have sales people and a whole fleet and the message gets diluted — you're not really taken care of as well of as [you are] by the guy who, ultimately, the buck stops with. Dave has taken painstaking steps over the years to keep his business small, which is a model you don't see, ever, in this industry."

Late in our day on the road, we arrive at the Craftwood and run into a Sysco delivery guy who inadvertently illustrates the service difference. The driver slides a stack of boxes off his dolly onto the kitchen floor as we enter, and while Hoffer gives the stack a cursory once-over, the driver patiently waits for an invoice signature. Once he's got it, we all nod politely and he's off to his big rig.

Nigh, meanwhile, has placed a few boxes on a counter and is unloading them, casually shelving most of the items for Hoffer. Only once does he have to ask where the chef wants something placed. He's not throwing in the service points because he feels he has to outdo the big boys; it's just his style.

"Nobody is my competitor," he later says. "We'll never be big enough to compete with them. We have a niche business: a pantry line not needed three times a week like proteins. ... What drives Sysco isn't what we've got."

In the Craftwood's kitchen, however, Nigh discovers a mistake: He forgot to bring a lime salt that Hoffer needs for a special banquet dish. Hoffer insists he can wait a few days and that it's no big deal, but Schott and Nigh decide that Schott will run the salt back by on his way home later, deaf to Hoffer's insistence otherwise.

Guess you can't call your business Extraordinary and then deliver only the ordinary.

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