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Colorado distilleries
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INDULGE & IMBIBE

DENVER DISHES COMFORT

Winter warmers
in the Mile High City
and beyond

by Eric Elkins

What does comfort food mean to you? A toasty cup of soup on a snowy day? A deep bowl of ramen, rich in broth and overflowing with noodles? Hot stews, redolent of braised meat and golden aromatics?

Sure, Colorado has plenty of those dishes (some served all year), but we also sport tasty platters of delight that will provide you with a warm belly and a happy heart on a chilly winter's day.

A rundown like this can be challenging, with so many changing menus inspired by seasonal ingredients and mile-high style. So I've focused on staple, signature dishes you should be able to find throughout the colder months.



Bronze Empire

INDULGE & IMBIBE



Uncle

Photograph by Eric Elkins

Hot Bowls o' Goodness

If you ask fans of **Uncle** what to order, they'll reliably tell you that the spicy chicken ramen with its creamy sesame broth and soft egg is the best thing you can slurp up on a crisp evening. But if you're up for something different, try their spiced lamb, all sauced up and flavorful, with nuances of fennel and coconut milk. It's served in a bowl alongside hot jasmine rice, which lets you mix the two together a little at a time, making every delectable bite balanced and perfect.

The modern take on traditional hot pot at **Bronze Empire** has a burner at every place setting, meaning everyone at the table can select one of their many broth options and then share all of the ingredients to drop in — from thinly-sliced brisket to seafood to mushrooms to tofu and more. Fill your table with everything you love, then cook it all in your personal pot until each item hits the tenderness your palate prefers.

On Fridays and Saturdays only, **Zoe Ma Ma** in Union Station serves up their unctuous and hearty duck noodle wonton soup. It's one of my favorite dishes in the whole city, and worth a stop on your way to or from the airport if you're taking the train at Union Station. This big bowl of noodles and broth is topped up with shredded duck meat and duck-filled wontons. Add in your sauce combination of choice and breathe in the happy.

Israeli Shakshuka, eggs simmered in a chunky tomato base, isn't just for breakfast anymore! And when it's served up at **Safta** (on the second floor of The Source Hotel in RiNo), with their epic fresh pita, you'll feel so enveloped by warmth and flavor, you won't care what time of day it is. The restaurant's menu is basically a rundown of the tastiest Mediterranean-inspired comfort foods.

For some of us, sushi is a year-round comfort food. But if you want something steamy, try the Agedashi Tofu at **Mizu Izakaya**. Served up in a Japanese pot, the dashi broth is salty and sweet, and the deep-fried tofu is crispy on the outside and panna cotta-smooth on the inside. A hot green tea and a cold sake are the perfect pairings on a cold, snowy day.

Fortune Wok-to-Table is a secret gem in the heart of Cherry Creek North. The casual downstairs dining area specializes in dumplings and toasty Chinese noodle soups — pick your broth, protein, and noodle style. You can also venture to the tiny upstairs dining room for a more elevated take on Chinese cuisine, like a rich and spicy Mapo Tofu.



The Way Back

Proteins and Potatoes and Pastas

If you just need a simple, delicious warmer and nothing else will do, make your way to one of the following restaurants and settle in for a fill-up.

The Way Back in the Highlands has some of the best home-made pastas you'll find in the city, but the restaurant, known for its constantly changing menu (based on fresh ingredients available) has a strong reputation for kick-ass fried chicken. Served up with seasonal sides, it's a go-to for neighborhood regulars.

And though Chef Justin Brunson is proud of his own fried chicken at meat-centric **Old Major**, he recommends the hearty ham and biscuits appetizer, served up with red pepper jam. Sweet and savory!

By the time you read this, **Ash'Kara** will have opened in the LoHi neighborhood! You'll want to warm up with their toasty tagines — warm, braised meats and veggies in a hearty sauce. Chef Daniel Asher is known for his comfort food as much as he is for his attention to detail and sustainable practices, so anything you order will be good for your soul.

Chow Morso opened their downtown brick-and-mortar restaurant in early autumn after a stint in the Avanti Food & Beverage startup incubator. The big star from the beginning was their gnocchi with crimini mushrooms and a rich umami sauce. With big flakes of parmesan cheese feathered over the whole bowl, this filling dish is an achievement.

The Wolf's Tailor (in the Highlands) changes its menu on the fly, depending on what ingredients are available. Whether you call it Japanese-inspired Italian food or Italian-inflected Japanese cuisine (you heard me), you'll also call it delicious. Dishes range from izakaya-style skewers and tapas to big, sharable plates of food. But with their pastas handmade from heirloom grains ground in-house, their noodle soups are unique and dramatic — think bucatini in a shitake and beef ragu or buckwheat soba noodles in a golden bone broth.

In Boulder, stop into **Oak at Fourteenth** for an array of comforting small plates, but don't miss the oak grilled beef short rib, fall-apart tender and served with cauliflower gremolata.

Ash'Kara



Casey Giltner



Hop Alley

If you're up in the mountains, you'll probably want to get yourself blue crab and shrimp enchiladas from **Maya** at The Westin Riverfront in Beaver Creek. Sure, a Mexican-inspired seafood dish might not be your first instinct in a mountain resort, but these sautéed crab-and-shrimp delights are filled with mascarpone and wrapped in a yellow corn tortilla and served with creamy salsa verde topped with a four-cheese blend. Kind of the perfect thing after a day on the slopes.

And no snowy day on the slopes is complete if you don't pick up a breakfast sandwich or two at **Blue Moon Bakery** just off the highway in Silverthorne.

Not into actual meat, but still want something that's going to fill your tummy and warm your insides? Head over to **Watercourse**, a vegetarian institution in Denver. The BBQ Jackfruit will make you think of pulled pork in BBQ sauce, but it's also safe for the vegans in your life. Watercourse is full of comfort foods sans meat, and you'll find something delicious no matter how much of a carnivore you may be.

Spicy Belly-Warmers

At Uncle's sister restaurant, **Hop Alley**, chef/owner Tommy Lee has a new and delicious addition to the menu -- Sichuan boiled beef. As he says, "Boring name, definitely not boring on the palate." The thin-sliced meat is simmered in a broth of peppers and fermented chili paste, and it has the inviting, front-of-the-tongue buzz that only Sichuan peppers can provide.

Over on Platte Street, **Dead Battery Club's** chef Scott Parker has been doing up a playful arrangement of hot, filled buns. For something unique and warming, try the green chile and brisket stuffed bun, which swims in a bowl of thick broth. Eat it with a spoon and be sure to get every last drop.

Steuben's is an Uptown classic (with a second location in Arvada), and though I'll always be in love with their flank steak with chimichurri butter, probably the most popular comfort dish is their green chile burger.

Oh, but **Work & Class** in RiNo is 100-percent comfort food, from the hearty sides to the meats you order by weight, each one special in its own way. I can't live without the roast lamb and tender beef short rib, but if you want to try something truly magical, order a half-pound of Chef Dana Rodriguez's shredded goat and savor every bite. It's so rich and delightful, deeply meaty in the best possible way, and will fill you with faith in humanity. Pair it with their chickpea fritters and you're golden.

The "Grandma's Plate" from **Dos Abuelas** food truck which is parked at Finn's Manor in RiNo, features a combo of rice, beans, and sweet plantains, paired with your choice of pork, steak, or chicken. It's a hot and friendly taste of Puerto Rico in a casual environment.

Wherever you go in Denver and beyond, you're sure to find the hearty dish that'll warm you up, fight those seasonal blues, or make you forget the stresses of the outside world for a few moments. We all need a hug in a bowl sometimes.

Eric Elkins loves to pair his comfort foods with a tasty bourbon cocktail. He's CEO of WideFoc.us Social Media, celebrating 11 years in business, and writes young adult novels on the side. He chronicles his tasty travels on Instagram at @ericelkins.



Duo

Photograph by Eric Elkins

Comfort on the Side

Plenty of side dishes and small plates fit the comfort food category, too. Here are a few staple faves.

Grilled Cheese: Melted cheese on bread is a trusty comfort food, no matter the season. The multi-cheese pressed wonder at **Lady Jane** is perfect for 1 a.m. hangover prevention, while the grilled cheese with tomato butter at **Duo** is a crunchy treat. **Morin's** Pain au Lait sandwich isn't comfort food for everyone (and it doesn't have cheese), but the crispy veal sweetbreads, served with pickled apples between slices of milk bread perfection, are a small wonder.

Mac 'n' Cheese: A year-round soul saver. Denver has its share of delicious variations. It's a must-order at **Interstate** in the Santa Fe Arts District, but also something you won't want to miss at **Low Country Kitchen** and **Steuben's**.

Soup Dumplings: Chef Lon's pillows of heat and happy at **ChoLon Bistro** are a Denver legend. Let 'em cool before you chomp on them.

Tartine and Fancy Toast: **Call's** seasonal tartines are all about fresh, winter flavors. Pair with their changing array of soups. And don't miss Chef Carrie Baird's seasonal fancy toasts at **Bar Dough**.

Tots: Crispy pillows of potato indulgence are my (drunk) comfort food of choice. My absolute favorites can be found at **Highland Tavern** — a classic, old-school sports bar in LoHi, and at **Carbon Beverage Café**, where their two-bite Wu Tang Tots are served up spicy and sweet and salty.

Morin's



Photograph by Eric Elkins

MORE THAN WHISKEY

Colorado distilleries bring new flavors
to the Old West

by Eric Elkins

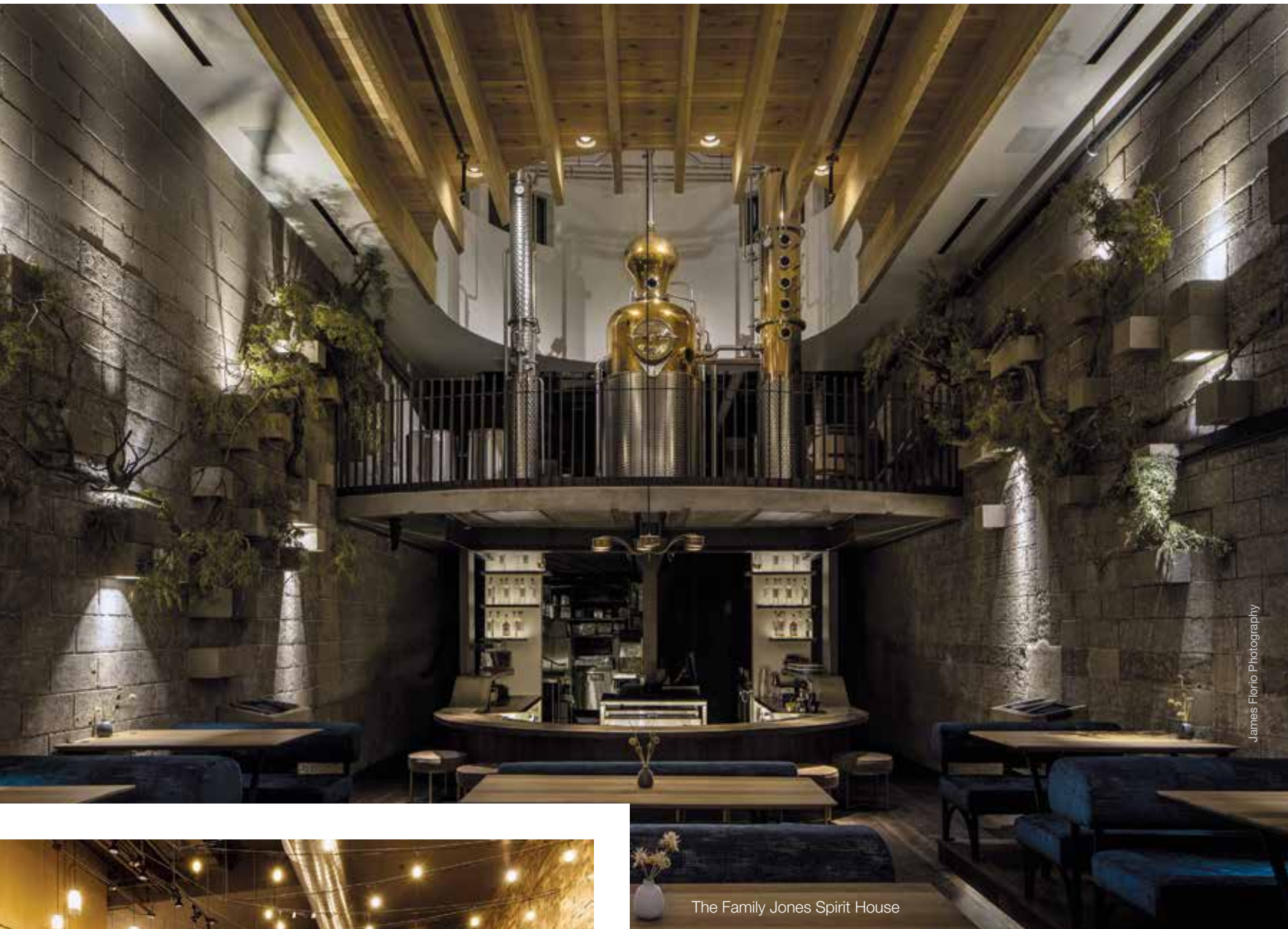
Every western flick has that moment when the hero wanders through the swinging doors of a dusky saloon, smacks a heavy, indeterminate coin on the bar, and demands a whiskey. The barman sidles over with an unlabeled bottle, pours a shot into a dirty glass, and is about to walk away when the dusty visitor says, "Leave the bottle."

The bartender shakes his head in mild bemusement and leaves the whiskey behind before wandering off to (always) take a rag to a beer mug at the other end of the bar.

These days, with more than 70 craft distilleries in Colorado, you can have a similar experience. Drink a bourbon (or a gin or vodka or absinthe or something equally delicious), and then take a bottle (or several) with you.

With distilleries spread out around the state, you'll want to bunch up your visits (and bring a designated driver or get your ride sharing app warmed up), eat something along the way, and drink a full glass of water with every cocktail.

The LoHi neighborhood in Denver has a couple spots where you can taste the spirits and eat something delicious while you do it.



James Florio Photography

The Family Jones Spirit House



Mythology Distillery

The Family Jones Spirit House serves up brilliant cocktails and killer small plates. You'll have to reserve a distillery tour and tasting in advance, but just sitting in the gorgeous restaurant and making your way down the drink list is a warm and cozy experience.

Mythology Distillery opened over the summer. It's a bar and distillery all in one, and their small-batch spirits are lovingly mixed into a fun range of classic and innovative cocktails. Their bottles are gorgeous works of art.

Up in RiNo, you could spend a day tasting local spirits and still not get to them all (not to mention the effect on your liver).

Start with **Ironton Distillery** for a "farm-to-flask" flavored liquor before wandering over to the **Block Distilling Co.** and their spicy Autumn Gin — fall flavors meet up with cinnamon and pepper in a smooth, balanced sippable spirit. You'll want to grab a bite from a food truck at Finn's Manor or a dish o' pasta at Dio Mio before buckling down for serious tasting at **BOOZ Hall RiNo**, where you can try local spirits from several Colorado distilleries (and a winery, too!), then purchase your favorites to take home with you.

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— Robert Calloway, Chicago



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Downtown, **Mile High Spirits** is an experience unto itself, with a massive tasting room/event space and back patio, and a mindboggling, dynamic array of infused spirits behind the bar. Hang out for live music or trivia, and be sure to try their Fireside Bourbon, which is like liquid butterscotch.

Out on the edges of the Denver Metro area, you'll taste some of the best spirits you've ever had. Stop in at Colorado distilling pioneer **Leopold Bros.** on your way to or from the airport — take a tour, taste a flight, buy a bottle of their New York Apple Whiskey (or their Fernet Amaro — holy crap, it's herbaceous and delicious). **Tighe Brothers**, also en route, is new to the Colorado distillery scene, and you'll love their gorgeously rustic tasting room.

To the south, you'll want to make a pilgrimage to **Stranahan's** to see where their legendary whiskeys are made before heading over to **Laws Whiskey House** for their well-aged, grain-to-glass Four Grain Straight Bourbon and spicy Secale Rye. If you're still sober enough to continue your journey, get over to **Bear Creek Distillery** and try a range of whiskeys, vodkas, and rums.

Even further south is Colorado's classic **Downslope Distilling**, which has won a slew of awards over their last decade-plus in business. Their Double Diamond Four Year Whiskey is finished in a cognac cask, which gives it an extra sparkly richness.

To the west in Golden, commit serious time to **Golden Moon Distillery**. Make sure you take your daily dose of liver-reviving milk thistle before stopping in at **Golden Moon Speakeasy**, because you'll want to try everything, from their floral-noted gin, to their award-winning Gun Fighter Bourbon, to their Redux absinthe, Dry Curaçao, and Crème de Violette. It's all so delicious, and their cocktails will change your life.

Boulder and its environs are home to their own spirit makers. **Vapor Distillery** (which used to be Roundhouse Spirits) is the oldest legal distillery in the county. You'll often find partners Ted Palmer and Alastair Brogen in the cozy bar or at work on their Boulder Gin or Boulder American Single Malt, which won the Beverage Testing Institute's 2018 North American Bourbon & Whiskey Competition.



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Elkins Distillery

Deviant Spirits, founded by three smart pals, does up small batch gin and vodka, and nearby **Ellwood Distilling** has a complex single malt whiskey that's won several awards in the past couple of years. Both have tasting rooms, but be sure they're open before you head over.

Just up the road from Boulder, in Lyons, is **Spirit Hound Distillers**, with their award-winning whiskeys and their very own "Colorado Sambuca." Taste away any day of the week, but they don't serve food so make sure you stop by The Regional before or after (or bring something with you to nosh as you sip).

I would be remiss if I didn't call your attention to **Elkins Distillery** (no relation) up the way from Lyons in Estes Park. Not only do they have the best name, ever, but you get to taste their array of spirits while taking in one of the most gorgeous mountain views in the region. Their white Corn Whisky is surprising in its sweet sipability, and their experimental Colorado Whisky is oaky goodness.



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Woody Creek Distillers



Steamboat Whiskey Company

DINING



Spending time up in the mountains? Buckle up. If you already love Breckenridge Bourbon, you won't want to miss visiting **Breckenridge Distillery**, where you can take a tour and taste several of their spirits in addition to their popular whiskey. I'm partial to their Breckenridge Bitter, which is the perfect aperitif on its own or in a variation of a boulevardier or paper plane. The Breckenridge Distillery restaurant is a full-on experience of its own, with Beard award-winner Chef David Burke at the helm.

The tasting room at **Woody Creek Distillers** is just west of Aspen, in the town of Basalt. Much of the produce used in their small batch spirits is grown on the family's and neighbors' farms. In fact, waste from their raw products goes back to the farm as compost, or to nearby ranches as livestock feed. You won't want to miss their locally grown, batch-distilled potato vodkas.

I love **Steamboat Whiskey Company**. Jessica and Nathan Newhall, the husband-and-wife team who built and run the distillery (and work it every damn day) are some of the friendliest people you'll meet. A former Navy SEAL, Nathan developed Warrior Whiskey as a way to give something back to our nation's veterans — proceeds from every bottle are donated to related support organizations. The whiskey is delicious, and their tasting room and bar is small, warm, and welcoming. Be sure to stop by if you're in Steamboat Springs.

Just as I can't possibly write about every distillery in the state, you won't be able to visit them all. But if you want to try, the Colorado Spirits Trail (coloradospiritstrail.com) has a directory and map of at least 52 tasting rooms around the state. It's a fun and informative way to track your drinking adventures.

Saddle up, partner!

Eric Elkins loves to belly up to the bar all over Colorado. He's CEO of WideFoc.us Social Media, celebrating 11 years in business, and writes young adult novels on the side. Track his epic eating adventures on Instagram at @ericelkins.

