



The Contemporary Sportsman  
**BAR & GRILLE**



**Steamboat Inn**

by Mart McCann

Photograph by Frank Barnett

# Steamboat Inn

Where Tranquility, History, and Fine Food  
Blend Like a Subtle Oregon Wine

Story by Mart McCann  
Photography by Frank Barnett





*Everyone's idea of the perfect getaway is probably a little different. Maybe your image of bliss is a rustic cabin with no television and no cellphone coverage. Perhaps you would prefer a Japanese-style soaking tub and free Wi-Fi.*

The Steamboat Inn on the North Umpqua River in southern Oregon not only offers those amenities, but you can also get delicious meals, a broad selection of regional wines, and fascinating stories of the inn's colorful past from hosts Jim and Sharon Van Loan and Patricia Lee. Oh, did I mention the steelhead fishing? There's steelhead fishing, too.

The inn is located just downstream from where Steamboat Creek joins the North Umpqua River. In the early part of the 20th century, after the native peoples had left the area, the only visitors were a few intrepid prospectors in search of gold and hunters

Zane Grey's campsite on Maple Ridge, downstream from Mott Bridge, 1934. Zane Grey is the shirtless man second from the right and his son Loren is on the far right.





Zane Grey, prolific Western author and the most famous sportsman of his day, angling for steelhead in the North Umpqua River. Over 110 movies were made from his stories.

looking for elk and deer. In the miners' vernacular, those leaving an unproductive stream "steamboated" out of the area. No one knows where the name Steamboat Creek originated, but it was in general use long before the dirt road was completed in 1927.

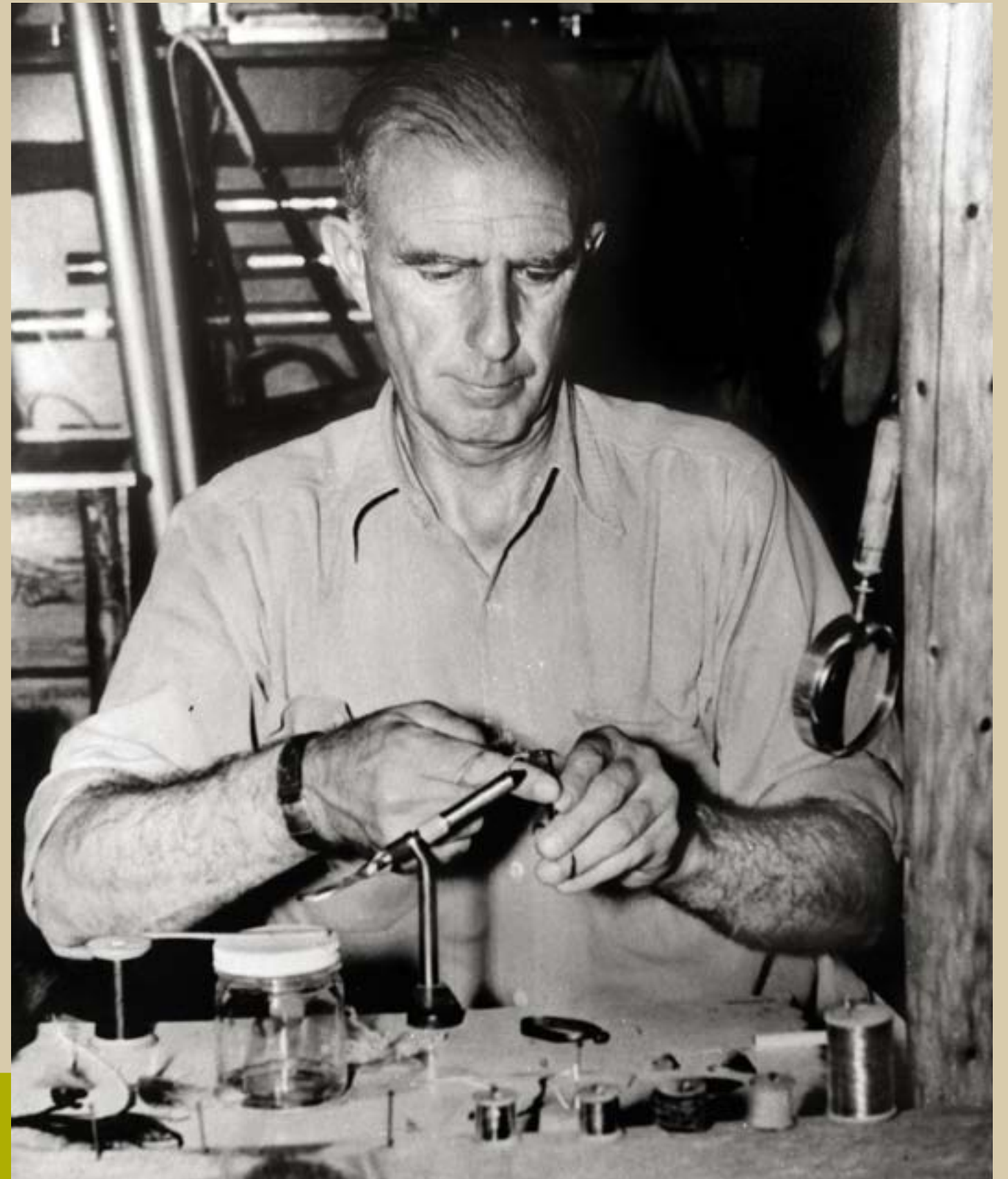
Major Jordan Lawrence Mott was the first angler of national repute to establish his summer camp on the south side of the main river. There's nothing like a juicy romantic scandal to add a little color to a story and Mott certainly provided that. By the time he arrived on the North Umpqua in 1929, he was happily married to Frances Hewitt Browne, but 17 years earlier he had run off to China with her, on a tramp steamer no less. Both were married to other people at the time, and when Mott refused to return to New York City, his millionaire father disinherited him. After serving in World War I, he and Frances lived on Santa Catalina Island off the coast of California where he fished for marlin and authored many magazine articles and books about the outdoors. Today Major Mott would have been called an environmentalist—a champion for wildlife and natural resource conservation. Unfortunately, he enjoyed the river for only two years before his death in 1931.

His years at Steamboat Creek may have been few, but Major Mott certainly left his mark on the place. The bridge that spans the North Umpqua River near his old camp and a series of nearby pools bear his name. Nearby is the "camp water," originally surveyed by Mott and his party. It is one of the most productive fishing areas on the entire river, owing to the fact that the native summer steelhead in the North Umpqua spawn in

Steamboat Creek but wait in the main river until the first heavy rains of autumn enable them to enter the creek.

It was not far from the Mott Bridge that Photographer Frank Barnett and I found David Renton early one morning, racing with the light. “When the sun hits the water, it’s over,” he explained. He asked if we were writing about fly fishing and seemed relieved that we were not. “A lot of people who don’t know about fly fishing write about it anyway.” This story is really about food and history and human ties, but you can’t very well write about the Steamboat Inn without at least mentioning the local steelhead and featuring a photograph of an angler.

The year after Major Mott’s death, Steamboat’s most illustrious visitor made his first appearance. Zane Grey, prolific author of Western novels and famous sportsman, had already popularized fishing on the Rogue River to the point where he believed that river was getting much too crowded. On his way to Campbell River in British Columbia in the summer of 1932, Grey and his entourage decided to layover near the junction of Steamboat and Canton creeks. Never one to travel light, the Grey party included Romer Grey, the author’s older son, as well as Romer’s wife, frequent fishing companion Dr. J.A. Wilborn and his wife, personal chef George Takahashi, and Grey’s secretaries who assisted with writing projects. As if that weren’t enough, Romer also brought several cameramen and other



**Right:** Clarence Gordon, owner and builder of the North Umpqua Lodge, at the fly-tying vise during his tenure, circa 1940.



**Left:** The original 16-foot dining room table at the North Umpqua Lodge, hewn in 1936 and still in use today at the Steamboat Inn.

**Above:** Bedroom at the North Umpqua Lodge with stone fireplace and hand-hewn twin beds, circa 1940.

technicians who worked for his motion picture company. The filmmaker convinced a local guide to help pilot several boats constructed by his movie crew down the river to provide thrilling footage for his audiences. Modern-day river running on the North Umpqua was born.

Asked if it were true that the locals considered Zane Grey something of a primo uomo, Steamboat Inn Manager and Partner Patricia Lee said, "Well, he would send his assistants to stake out several pools which prevented others from fishing their favorite spots. This is considered bad behavior, and Zane Grey wasn't well-liked by the locals." That may well explain why there are no pools named for Grey, although there is one named for his cook, George Takahashi.

*Hoping to spare the North Umpqua from the fate of the Rogue (which was partly his fault), Zane Grey published an article pleading for prudent management of the river.*

By 1935, Zane Grey considered Steamboat crowded and moved to a more secluded spot on the south side of the river across from Williams Creek. All visitors and gear had to be ferried across, so Grey could control access and maintain his distance from other anglers. His party enjoyed some fabulous fly fishing during their visits to the North Umpqua. Grey's youngest son, Loren, reported catching over one hundred steelhead in less than two months of fishing in 1935. Hoping to spare the

North Umpqua from the fate of the Rogue (which was partly his fault), Zane Grey published an article pleading for prudent management of the river. He also supported the Roseburg Rod and Gun Club in their efforts to have Steamboat Creek, the river's prime spawning ground, closed to angling.

During the 1920s and 30s, John Ewell owned and operated the Camp View Motel in Roseburg, roughly 40 miles west of where the Steamboat Inn now stands. It was he who introduced Clarence Gordon to the North Umpqua River in 1929. Like Zane Grey and his retinue, the Gordons were traveling between Southern California and British Columbia when they decided to layover in the area. Innkeeper Ewell took Clarence upstream to fish at Steamboat, while Delia Gordon remained in Roseburg. On the way back from Canada, they stayed in the area again, this time camping near Susan Creek. In 1930 and 1931, they returned and Gordon began to dream of building a lodge where Major Mott had established his camp.

Clarence Gordon secured the permission of the Forest Service to build his resort in 1934, and a year later several tents, a rustic dining room, and a kitchen had been constructed. He also managed the Smoke Tree Ranch in Palm Springs and a Pasadena resort during the winter. His fishing camp, the North Umpqua Lodge, began to attract a regular clientele of professional men as the result of his connections in Southern California. He even invited Ray Bergman, the angling editor of *Outdoor Life* magazine, to come sample the fishing at Steamboat. Bergman became such a fan of the area that his classic book, *Trout*,





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contains an entire chapter entitled “Steelhead of the Umpqua.” Still in print after more than 70 years, *Trout* is considered as relevant today as the day it was published.

At the urging of the Forest Service, Clarence Gordon made the North Umpqua Lodge permanent by constructing more cabins and a lodge. The “dugout,” four bedrooms with baths and a central living room, followed. Additional cabins, an office building, and a fly-tying room were constructed later.

Post-war dam building and road construction had adverse effects on the North Umpqua River, and on Clarence Gordon’s lodge. Heavy siltation and fluctuating water levels resulted in a dwindling number of fish. In fact, the situation was so bad that the Gordons cancelled all the reservations for the summer of 1952 (which had been fully booked) and only old friends visited their camp for the next few years. During that time, the buildings on the south side of the river were leased to a construction company, and in 1955 the Forest Service bought Gordon’s south side holdings for the Steamboat Ranger station.

The Steamboat Inn, as we know it today, began to take shape in the early 1950s when Clarence Gordon built the Steamboat Store to serve hot lunches to the construction crews. Originally located on the north side of the Umpqua where Steamboat Creek joins the river, the store was later moved to the spot where the Steamboat Inn’s main buildings now stand.

Clarence Gordon was also a talented woodcarver and carpenter. He built the reception desk that is still in use today. A beautiful woodcut of a water wheel stands above the fireplace in

the Maple Ridge Cabin, and a decorative chest graces the library.

Frank and Jeanne Moore were to be the Gordons successors. In 1957, they purchased the store and began building cabins just down the hill from the main lodge. Writing to many of the Gordons’ past guests, they reassured them that summer steelhead fishing had recovered from the dam building and the inn was open for business. A group of Steamboat Inn regulars developed—families who enjoyed each other’s company as much as they enjoyed fishing along the North Umpqua River. In 1966, they formally organized as The Steamboaters “to preserve the natural resources of the North Umpqua.”

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Logging of old-growth Douglas fir in the nearby forests posed the next threat to the North Umpqua, but a well-timed visit by a couple of young filmmakers changed all that. Hal Riney and Dick Snider, advertising executives and avid fishermen, were on their way to British Columbia to make a sport-fishing movie but decided to change the focus of their film when they saw what effect careless logging practices were having on the tributaries of the North Umpqua. The resulting film, *Pass Creek*, was given a national audience and resonated with the nascent



Katie Meyer sets the 16-foot table for the evening meal. Hewn from one piece of sugar pine in 1936, the table has seen service in the North Umpqua Lodge as well as the Steamboat Inn.

ecology movement. Clear-cut logging in National Forests came under scrutiny, and the film was a factor in the passage of the Oregon Forest Practices Act.

The Moores sold the Steamboat Inn to Jim and Sharon Van Loan in 1975 and, once again, a transformation was underway. Joined in 1978 by Pat Lee, who is now the inn Manager and Partner, Sharon brought elegance to the resort without losing any of its warmth. “It was a fishing camp when we bought it, but now it’s so much more.”

*“The North Umpqua has come to be known as the ‘graduate school’ of steelhead fishing. Since you can fish here for days and not catch a steelhead, we consciously focus on the food.”*

Several factors coalesced in the decade that followed to shift the nature of the Steamboat Inn’s clientele from fishermen to include wine- and nature-lovers. The burgeoning bed-and-breakfast movement brought equal numbers of visitors who were interested in a gourmet meal, but the coincident boom in the sport of fly fishing also increased the number of anglers.

Pat took a break from overseeing operations in the busy dining hall to share some background information about both the inn and the fishing. “The North Umpqua has come to be known as the ‘graduate school’ of steelhead fishing. Since you can fish here for days and not catch a steelhead, we consciously focus on the food.” Chef Dax Erickson, on hiatus from the Multnomah

Athletic Club, a Portland social institution since 1891, came in on his day off to talk about the cuisine and demonstrate his culinary prowess. While Frank photographed rack of lamb with marionberries, Pat continued to share wonderful stories of life on the river.

The inn is closed in January and February. “On January 1st, we have our annual ‘clean out the walk-in refrigerator’ meal. The first weekend in March, we begin our Guest Chef and Winemaker Program and that goes for three-and-a-half months. Some weekends, it’s Friday and Saturday, sometimes just Saturday.” Guests are treated to conversation with well-known winemakers, while the guest chef prepares dishes to complement the vintners’ offerings. This year’s roster of illustrious chefs included Gabe Rucker of Le Pigeon, Heathman Culinary Director Philippe Boulot, and Brian Light of Jake’s Grill, all in Portland.

The Steamboat Pinot Noir Conference is held Wednesday through Sunday, on the weekend preceding the International Pinot Noir Celebration in McMinnville (about a four-hour drive), so that international visitors can attend both. The Steamboat event is not for consumers— since its inception in 1980, the goal of the gathering has been to bring Pinot Noir producers together to blind taste unfinished Pinots from around the world and to openly exchange information regarding grape growing and winemaking. Originally attended by just eight people, the current conference roster of tasters numbers about seventy, with many second-generation Oregon winemakers joining the list. Pat recalled that the children of winemakers at Ponzi, Elk Cove, and Bethel Heights





Vineyards all came to Steamboat as kids, and have returned as adult participants and leaders in their industry.

Like the summer steelhead returning to spawn, it's not just winemakers who come back to their childhood haunts. "Last summer at my god-daughter's wedding," Pat recalled, "two guys who used to run up and down the dining room benches as children approached me about providing fresh vegetables for our kitchen. Today they grow organic food just eleven miles west of here." She is deservedly proud of the inn's reputation for wonderful food. "Our first cookbook was published in 1988 and we were buying local lamb and cooking seasonally more than 25 years ago." The cookbook, *Thyme and the River*, was followed a few years later by the equally successful *Thyme & the River Too*.

I didn't realize, until I got back home and did more research, that Pat was also a highly-regarded and skilled fishing guide, but I should have guessed as much from her knowledge of steelhead and the North Umpqua River. "There's a summer run and a winter one. Winter is a 100% wild fish run; summer is heading in that direction. The attitude about hatchery fish is kill 'em and get 'em out of the gene pool. Wild fish are used as brood stock."

Katie Meyer, a lovely young woman with an infectious smile, came out to set the tables for dinner and the conversation turned to the incredibly friendly and helpful staff, "...hired

**Left:** Chef Dax Erickson puts the finishing touches on a platter of lamb with marionberries.





primarily on the recommendation of current staff, which is why we have such terrific people. We have some families where all the kids have worked for us.” Former employee Kas McGregor, whose nephew had been married in the garden earlier in the week, reminisced: “In 1979 there was a two-pump gas station out front. When the bell would ring, one of us would run out, pump gas, come back in, wash up, and keep cooking.”

“Before air conditioning,” Pat added, “we’d cook, jump in the river, wring out our clothes, and go back to work refreshed.”

In the library, hors d’oeuvres are served at 7:00 p.m. On the night we stayed at the inn, we enjoyed spanakopita triangles, hummus with black bean tortilla chips, local cherry tomatoes, and, of course, regional wine. The large, inviting room looks out on a garden accented by blue hydrangeas and two carefully tended 60-year-old apple trees. “They were never good producers,” confided Pat, “so we prune them for shade.” A rock

retaining wall runs along one side of the lush lawn. “We had this old Dodge Power Wagon that Sharon and I used to drive out into the woods to collect all those rocks.” Life on the river must have been such an adventure in those days.

Jim Van Loan sat at the head of our dinner table and entertained his guests with science as well as history. “It was never true that your waders would fill with water if you fell in,” he advised Frank, who was thinking of his gear for the following morning’s photo shoot. “That would violate the basic laws of physics.” The conversation turned from publishing (Jim, Frank, and Joel Zaklin, another guest at our table, had all worked for publishers at one time—small world) to David Lett, founder of Eyrie Vineyards, affectionately known by those in the wine industry as Papa Pinot. Lett’s success with his 1975 South Block Pinot Noir put Oregon on the wine-making map.

David Lett “...planted his first ‘starts’ outside Corvallis,





where we were living at the time,” recalled Sharon Van Loan. Jim continued, “He found the land he wanted outside Monroe but the owner would only sell in 200-acre parcels, which David could not afford. Well, David went back to the Oregon State library, which had a Geographic Information System, and found the soil he wanted, a red volcanic variety, near Dundee in the Yamhill Valley. He bought 14 acres.” And then Sharon added, “Early on, we often took care of David—he was a bachelor in those days.” I asked about the original property near Monroe; the consensus was that Broadley Vineyards might grow grapes there now.

The main dining room’s most striking feature is the communal table, 16 feet long and made of one single piece of sugar pine. It was hewn in 1936 by a bachelor logger named Scott, and Knute Kershner, a 16-year-old guide at the lodge. “The family of the teenage boy who built that table was here last night. It took an entire summer to cut that piece of wood.” Jim then proceeded to describe how such a feat was accomplished: once the tree



had been felled, a “saw pit” was dug under it. Using a two-man cross cut saw, Scott would push the saw down and Kershner, the smaller of the two, would push the saw up from underneath the tree in the saw pit. As progress was made down the length of the log, the saw pit was filled in and dug again in the adjacent space. Little wonder that it took all summer.

While we could have listened to the Van Loan’s delightful wine lore and stories about the inn’s rich history all night, we eventually returned to our comfortable cabin to prepare for the early-morning photo shoot on the river. Returning to the inn midday for more food photographs, we found ourselves surrounded by travelers enjoying lunch on the enclosed porch as well as in the main dining room. It hadn’t occurred to me that the dining room was open to casual passers-by, but sometimes

as many as 200 meals are served there, according to Pat Lee.

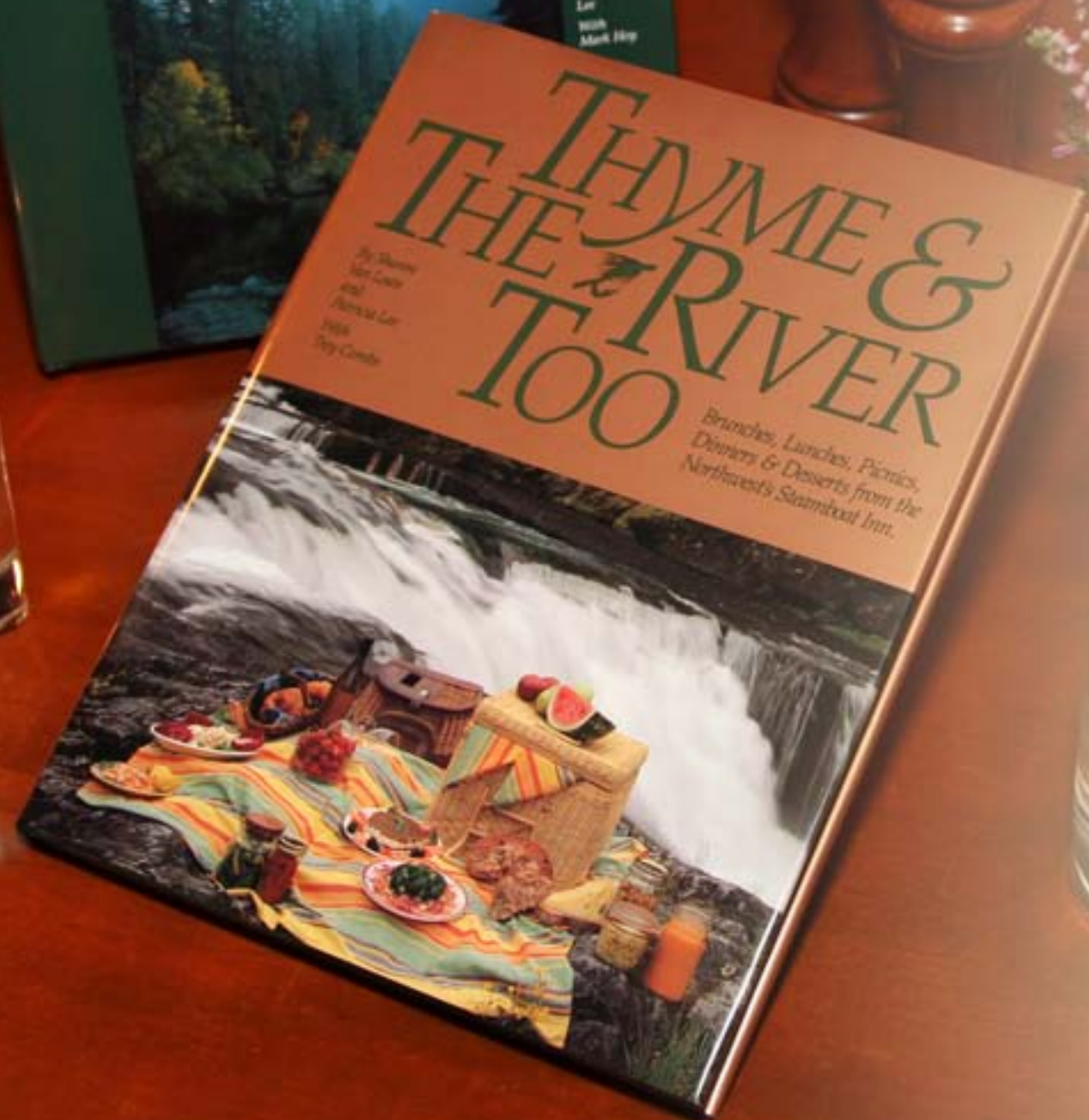
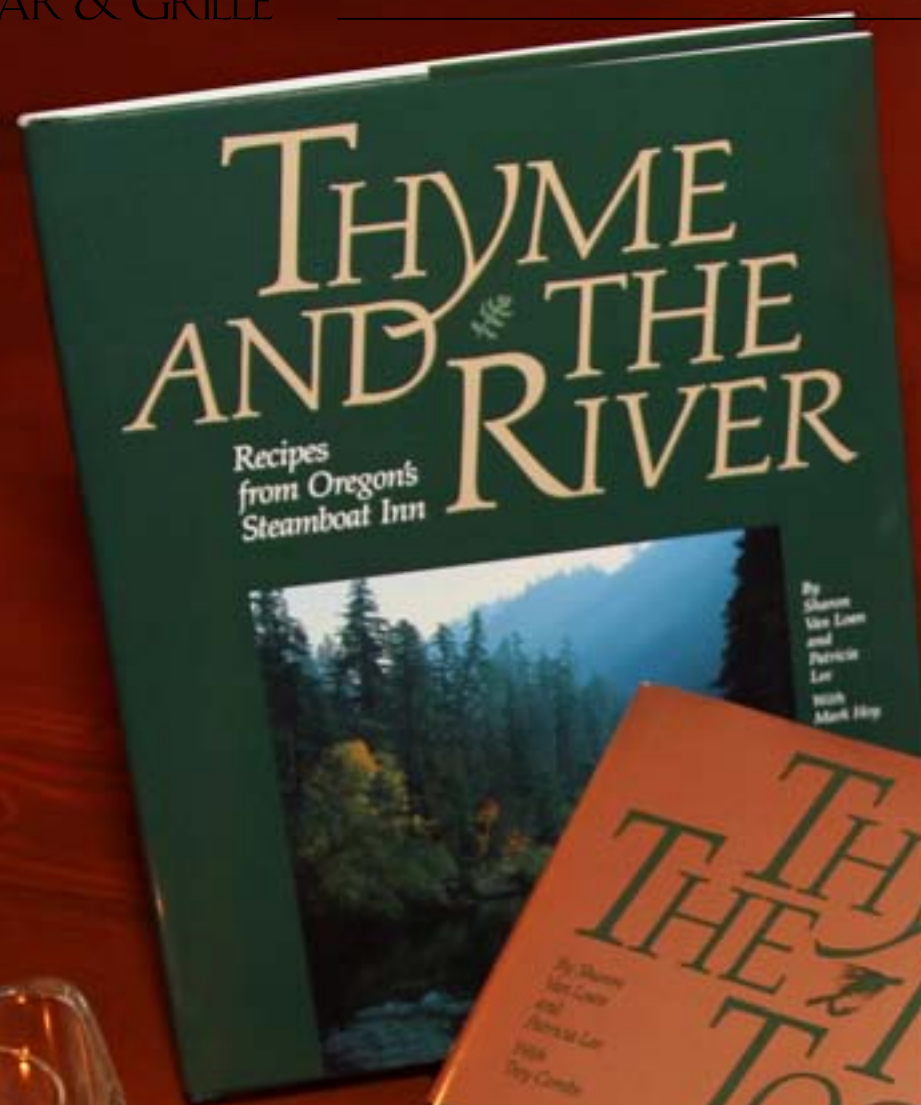
One day at the Steamboat Inn hardly seems like enough time to be considered part of the extended family of friends and winemakers, but the hospitality there is remarkable. They say you are a stranger there but once. We didn’t feel like strangers for a single moment.

*Special thanks to Jim and Sharon Van Loan and Patricia Lee for the time they spent introducing us to the history and environs of the Steamboat Inn, as well as the access they provided to historic photographs reproduced in this article.*

## Grandma's Bread

Jeanne Moore's mother, "Grandma Maes," was the originator of Grandma's Bread, although Jim Van Loan revealed that she got the basis for her recipe from Prevention magazine. According to our hostess Sharon Van Loan, Grandma was something of a health nut who believed that everyone should start the day with a nutritious breakfast. "The original recipe used crushed oyster shells as a calcium supplement and once in a while, you'd get a little piece of seashell in your bread," Sharon recalled. After the recipe was evaluated by a nutritionist, the oyster shells were replaced by powdered milk and substitutes were found for some other hard-to-find ingredients such as rice polish and graham flour.

The bread is baked in one-pound coffee cans, or wheat germ cans, which are the same size. While Frank was taking photographs in the kitchen, I enjoyed several slices of this dense, delicious bread. Untoasted, the distinctive flavor of sunflower seeds is evident, and the tiny flecks of carrot make the bread attractive as well as tasty. I didn't try it toasted because, by the time someone told me that was the only way to eat it, I was moderately stuffed. I knew the recipe was in the cookbook, *Thyme and the River*, so I planned on baking some at home. Then I read the preface to the list of ingredients: Be aware of the proportions in this recipe! I don't think there is a bowl in my kitchen large enough to accommodate Grandma's Bread, but in case you want to give it a whirl, here's the recipe:

**Combine in a large bowl:**

2 cups wheat germ  
 1½ cups cornmeal  
 ⅓ cup carob powder  
 2 cups soy flour  
 14 cups whole wheat flour  
 7 teaspoons salt  
 2 cups sunflower seeds  
 2 cups milk powder  
 ½ cup brewers yeast powder  
 2 cups millet  
 4 cups white flour

**Cook oats:**

Cook ½ cup regular oats in 1½ cups water 10 minutes, or cover with water and cook in microwave 1 minute.

**Combine and set aside:**

3 tablespoons yeast  
 ½ cup lukewarm water  
 1 teaspoon honey

**Combine in a large bowl:**

9 cups hot water  
 1½ cups honey  
 1½ cups oil  
 2 cups carrot puree

Combine all ingredients in the large bowl. Add more white flour until the dough is a consistency that can be kneaded. Turn onto a floured board and knead. (Sometimes it is easiest to knead it half at a time.) Place in an oiled bowl. Cover and let rise in a warm place 1 to 1½ hours.

Punch down and let rise again. Divide into 1¼-pound loaves. Knead and place in oiled 1-pound coffee cans. While the oven is preheating, let the bread rise to the third ring in the can. Bake in a 350° oven about 40-50 minutes, rotating the loaves if necessary. Makes 16-18 loaves. (It freezes well!)

Photographs documenting the colorful history of the Steamboat Inn hang above the main dining room on a heavy beam. In more-or-less chronological order, they depict the people and places that have helped shape the inn's character. On the far right of the display is a photo of Governor Tom McCall, coming out of the water with his rod in one hand and a steelhead in the other. Inn Manager Pat Lee mentioned that the image in the photograph had been made into a bronze statue, although she wasn't quite sure where the statue was located.

On our way back to Portland, we decided to detour for an hour or two in Salem where there is a carousel with hand-carved horses, one of only a few in the country, and a great subject for photographers. After shooting our carousel images, we walked down to the edge of the river where the Willamette Queen, an old paddle-wheeler, is docked and visited with Capt. Richard Chesbrough for a few minutes. Heading up the riverbank toward the parking lot we came across a larger-than-life statue of—you guessed it—the beloved former Governor, Tom McCall, wearing bronze waders and showing off a metallic steelhead.



Partners Patricia Lee on the left, and Sharon and Jim Van Loan relax in the Steamboat Inn's library before dinner.