

Fine likes Jackson Hole as ‘foodie city’

His restaurants, catering firm, have up to 400 employees, and aim to serve 2,000 dinners on weekends.

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RACHEL SHAVER / NEWS&GUIDE FILE

Gavin Fine

With words like “foodie city” used to describe Jackson and with valley restaurants appearing on “best of” lists all over the place, it appears the Tetons have new bragging rights.

Gavin Fine and his good friend Chef Roger Freedman have been instrumental in that transformation. They opened Rendezvous Bistro in Jackson in 2001. From there followed the creation of the Fine Dining Restaurant Group, which now includes Bistro Catering, Q Roadhouse & Brewing Co. in Wilson, Il Villaggio Osteria in Teton Village, Bin22 and the Kitchen in Jackson, and Silver in Park City, Utah.

Fine has been voted Best Boss and Entrepreneur for several years and was the Teton Board of Realtors’ 2013 Business Person of the Year. He and his wife, Lea, have two sons.

Q. How many customers a night do you serve?

A: We did 1,500 covers last night [Aug. 5]. On weekends with weddings and special events, another 100 to 400 people. A couple thousand people [a night] is our goal on weekends.

Q. What’s a typical day like for you?

A: I get up at 6 and try to get a couple of things done. I have some coffee, drop my kid off at school and get to the office between 8 and 9. There’s no normalcy after that. It’s all across the board. Some days are spent with chefs and managers. Some days are spent dealing with financial matters, and some days are spent on marketing. Business hours are between 9 and 4. Once 4 o’clock hits, it’s restaurants. Some nights I manage a restaurant. Some nights I’m there if there’s an event at a restaurant. Some nights I go home.

I used to try to hit all the restaurants in a night. That became more difficult because I’d have to go to Teton Village and back and such. Now I try to focus, to stay in one or two places at a time. As you expand you have to hire really good people and train them to execute what you

Q. How many employees do you have?

A. In the summertime it's almost 400 — 250 to 275 are full-time. Between Park City and the catering business is what bumps it up in the summer. There's an enormous number of events and weddings June through September. We also have more employees in the summertime because the restaurants expand, with outside seating and the number of customers.

Q. You've said in the past that it's important for you to offer "real" jobs. Can you elaborate?

A. When I first moved here I was 21 years old. If you could make a life for yourself here in Jackson Hole, with a "real job," that was a dream for a lot of people.

I consider all restaurant jobs real jobs, though parents might not think so. I thought if I could provide health insurance, provide other benefits, it would make it more enticing for you to settle down and stay.

Consistency in the restaurant business is enormous. You want your duck confit to taste the same as the time before. That's an important part of the restaurant business.

The other important part is people. This is such a transient town. If I could get people to buy here and stay and have a family here, it's great for my business. The consistency of the person who served you will be there season after season. That's just as important if not more important than your food.

There are so many transplants here. Nobody has a family. For 21- to 35-year-olds who are deciding the next phase of their life, to have this family here makes them feel like it's not a job every time they're coming in. That's really the core of what this is about: providing a safe place for employees to grow and have a place they call home.

Q. What about the housing crisis?

A. I've seen it ebb and flow over my 18 years here. I'm confident that there's a lot smarter people than I who will help.

Q. Is it making it harder for you to get employees?

A: That's one reason why we do what we do to keep them. We're pretty lucky, considering. We have tons of employees who are sharing rooms and struggling. We do see it firsthand.

Q. Wine Enthusiast put Jackson on its list of "America's 5 New Foodie Cities." Do you agree we're now a foodie city?

A: That is the best thing that could happen. The restaurants here are not competing against each other, we're competing against other towns. People used to come here and say, "Aspen has all this food." It used to make me upset. That's what we're competing against.

If you can get the same food you can get in New York or LA or Chicago or Dallas, that's another reason for you to come back. Airlines, shops, hotels, restaurants ... we all win. That is what my goal has always been: Blow those other ski towns out of the water and keep that customer who wants those things.

People are really into what they put into their bodies now with food. It's an important part of a town to have good options. All the restaurants in Jackson have stepped up. I've traveled to other ski towns. I do believe Jackson is above and beyond the others. We were the only ski town that was on the Wine Enthusiast list. Salt Lake City, which is on the list, is 1 million-plus human beings. They all were places that are a million-plus people.

I'm glad we were able to be a part of helping out.

Q. Are there any restaurant niches here that need to be filled?

A. No comment. Anything that's good, people will go to. I'm not a food trends kind of guy. It's a marathon for me, not a sprint. We are all starving for anything that's good.

Q. You have a restaurant in Park City. Are there any other markets you would want to go into?

A. We're looking at that right now. Jackson is our home. It's hard enough to run six businesses here in Jackson and keep that family atmosphere. I'd have to think long and hard about that.

Q. What's the biggest reward of running a restaurant business?

A. The biggest reward is definitely my employees. Taking somebody, whether they didn't care about food or wine or beer, and just watching that person become passionate about that and succeed, that's the biggest reward so far.

Q. What's the biggest challenge?

A: There's a lot of balls in the air all the time. It's such a dynamic business. It's extremely addicting. You have to have a love for it.

Employees have been the biggest challenge — keeping people in Jackson. You go to a restaurant six times and have six great experiences; it's the seventh experience that really colors your view.

Eating out is one of the most private things we do in public. Everyone has a different view of what's right and wrong, how it's cooked — even two people at the same table. How do you continually meet all those needs and get across to the customer that we're going to do everything we can to make it right, but there are going to be mistakes?

Q. Do you have a favorite dish that's served at one of your restaurants?

A: It changes with the season and with our menus. They're like my children. If I picked one I'd hear about it, and then I'd have a challenge on my hands.

Q. Would you tell your kids to go into the restaurant business?

A: It's not for me to say. I was lucky to have supportive parents who let me follow my own dreams. If you do follow your passion the rest will follow.