

Summertime Is Sweet at 10,152 Feet

Leadville proves you can have your mountains and eat fresh produce too

BY RHEA MAZE



Greg Atkinson making killer smoothies at the Leadville farmers' market. Photo by Ryan Igucci, Prosper Studios

The weather couldn't make up its mind. Snow turned to sleet; the sun came out and briefly basked in a crisp blue sky before retreating behind dark clouds. It didn't seem like late spring until I stepped into Leadville local Sandi Halverstadt's greenhouse.

"It can get pretty humid in here," she said as she carefully tended to a vibrant bounty of vegetables, berries, fruit trees and herbs. Halverstadt, an artist and photographer who moved to Leadville from Kansas City 26 years ago, is thrilled to no longer be limited by the weather or what's in the grocery store.

"When I moved to Leadville, what I missed most about living at sea level was my garden," she says. With her new Ceres high-tech, energy-efficient greenhouse, she and her husband, Dale, can grow food year-round without the use of fossil fuels—even when winter temperatures drop below zero.

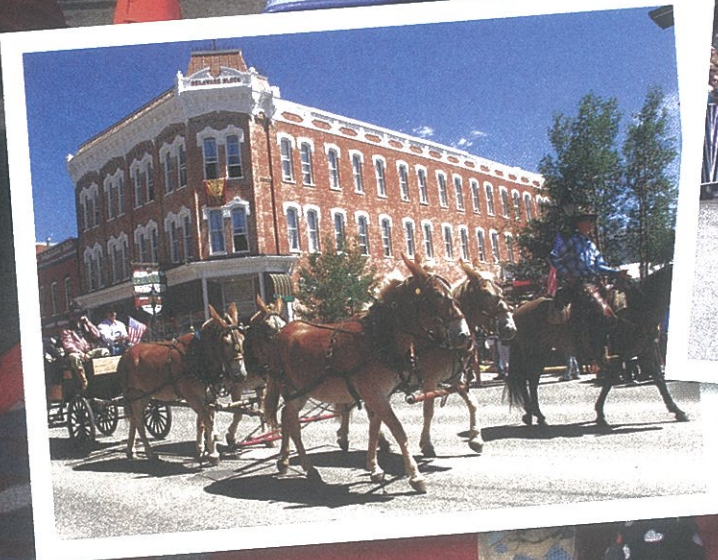
Leadville, Colorado, is the highest incorporated city in the U.S. and has a population of approximately 2,643 residents. The city's 150-year-old mining history began in 1860 with the discovery of gold. The boom and bust years that followed brought miners from all over the world in search of gold, silver, lead, zinc and more. Currently, Climax molybdenum mine is the only operational commercial mine left in the area.

While Leadville is more widely known for its colorful mining history and summer run and bike race series than gardening, many residents are beginning to join creative community efforts to expand the local food scene. When you live next to Colorado's tallest fourteeners and largest glacial lakes—in a hip mountain town boasting North America's highest golf course, college campus, cookie bakery and more—the only thing missing is the garden.

"Freshness is a very important quality of food. Nutrients get lost when produce is transported across the country," says Amanda Jensen, owner and creator of Leadville's first official farmers' market. Now in its second season and thriving, the market's primary food vendors include Paonia's Austin Family Farm and Buena Vista's Jumping Good Goat Dairy. Jensen also showcases a variety of new edible products each week like quinoa from White Mountain Farm in the San Luis Valley, mushrooms, honey and more in an interactive tasting tent featuring artisan food items from around the state.

"There are always really nice natural food sources available even though it's a small market," she says.

While the market's fresh food sources currently come from other nearby towns, Jensen is reserving space in next year's vendor lineup for Leadville's own Chicken Hill Community Garden. Currently in its first growing season, Chicken Hill is dedicated to demonstrating successful organic, non-GMO food production at high altitude, involving and educating the community, starting a CSA and eventually



Top: The finish line at the Leadville Trail 100 Run; photo by David Hahn. Inset left: Leadville Boom Days festival; photo by Steve Sunday. Inset right: The Leadville Trail 100 Mountain Bike Race; photo by David Hahn.

having a booth at the market.” Despite the lack of Leadville-based farms, most of the vendors at the farmers’ market are locals.

“The goal of the market has not only been to provide fresh produce and good nutritious food for people up here but also to showcase the incredibly talented locals,” Jensen says. Live music sets the ambiance for the eclectic Thursday afternoon market as residents and tourists alike check out handmade retail items complementing the tents of fresh food. Offering everything from jewelry, soaps and lotions to salsa, pottery and reiki services, the market succeeds in highlighting Leadville’s unique character. Jensen hopes this will help keep tourists in town a bit longer.

“So many people drive through Leadville on their way to Vail or Aspen and literally hop out of the car to snap a shot of downtown before continuing on their way.”

Those who stick around might opt to taste authentic Wild West whiskey made in-house at the brand new Two Guns distillery (TwoGunsDistillery.com) or grab a cup of locally roasted coffee at City on a Hill (CityOnAHillcoffee.com). They may browse funky consignment shops, try on outdoor clothing made in Leadville at Melanzana (Melanzana.com), tour historical mining museums, make pottery at Fire on the Mountain or even attend an opera at the Tabor Opera House, built in 1879 (TaborOperaHouse.net).

Restaurants where visitors can whet their appetites include the Grill Bar and Café (GrillBarCafe.com), a local favorite for authentic Mexican food; Casa Blanca, where you can sip margaritas inside a historic home built in 1894; High Mountain Pies (HighMtnPies.com)—a hot spot with homemade pizza crusts and unique toppings like dried cherries, green chile and cream cheese; Cookies With Altitude—North America’s highest cookie bakery and the best place in town for dessert; or Pastime Bar, where you can play the juke box while enjoying locally renowned burgers.

Food aside, some of Leadville’s best flavor is being served up by its two new art galleries.

“I opened my shop to help local artists and crafters become more widely recognized,” says Jill Smith, owner of Re Plus Designs. Smith promotes a rotating cast of local artists in her store and as a board member of the Leadville Arts Coalition helps coordinate public art projects with schools around town. In addition to local photography, paintings, pottery, intricate leather and lace work, sculptures, candles and more, her store also features rescued heirloom furniture she repurposes herself and beetle-kill wood crafts and home furnishings made by her husband.

Though the arts scene is exploding, there are two even more important reasons Smith makes Leadville her home. “The views,” she says. “And it’s like a playground up here. I get jazzed up each summer when all that positive racing energy comes through town.”

Leadville is paradise for outdoor enthusiasts and elite athletes. People come from all over the world to partake in some of the country’s toughest 50- and 100-mile foot and bike races, which can include cumulative elevation gains of over 11,500 feet.

“Leadville is a great place to train and race in endurance athletic events. Besides the beautiful summer weather and rarefied air, Leadville has an intimate, small-town charm. Many racers who return year after year consider themselves part of a family,” says Jonathan Zeif, an endurance athlete who has completed the 100-mile run 11 times and the 100-mile bike eight times, in addition to numerous other race events in Leadville. When in town, he stays at the Leadville Hostel where owners Bill Clower and Cathy Hacking get up at 2am on race day to prepare breakfast for the athletes.

Another draw is Leadville’s proximity to adventure—from town, it’s 10 minutes to the base of some of the highest peaks in the nation. Hiking, biking, horseback riding, skiing, camping, fishing and rafting opportunities abound.

“We have tons of wilderness and it’s pretty photogenic just about everywhere up here,” says Leadville Ranger District Forestry Tech Luke Orr. In fall, many tourists visit the Twin Lakes area to capture the perfect shot of an entire mountainside lit up by flaming aspens.

Others come up to attend Leadville’s quirky festivals such as Boom Days, a summer celebration of mining history, and Crystal Carnival, a winter event showcasing skijoring, where a horse and rider tow a racing skier through a challenge course. A sign greets motorists as they enter town: “Welcome to Historic Leadville, On Top of it All.” And with the recent growth of the local food movement, Leadville now has it all too.

Jensen admits her original motive for planning the farmers’ market was selfish: She missed fresh food and knew that having access to it would make life at 10,152 feet complete.

“My goal now is to make sure that even people way up here can get fresh produce,” Jensen says. “There’s nothing quite like biting into a plum that was picked the day before.”

If you go:

- The Leadville farmers’ market runs Thursdays 2–7pm until Sept. 5 (except for the first weekend in August) and is held on the courthouse lawn.
- Boom Days takes place the first weekend in August (LeadvilleBoomDays.com).
- Crystal Carnival takes place the first weekend in March. For more information check out VisitLeadvilleCO.com.