

Burgers and Beer (and Backcountry Skiing)

Contributed by Monica Prella

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You see, last week, fishing season began which means two things for backcountry skiers: 1. Roads are plowed, opening up backcountry access to higher trailheads and 2. Remember to throw your fly rod in the truck for a post-ski-beer-in-one-hand-rod-in-the-other-hand fishing session.

Just a few weeks before the season opener, my husband, Jon, and I checked the outlet of the Convict Lake for trout spawning in the sandy, shallow water. Parked in the lot was a van with the doors wide open, skis and packs spread across the asphalt, and a few guys lounging in the shade. They likely skied one of the famed chutes on Laurel Mountain or possibly a line off Mt. Morrison. The afternoon was warm and the sky was a brilliant blue.

Now, the lot looks the same as that sunny afternoon, but the backcountry skiers share the space with fisherman launching boats. Each assemble their tools at dawn and later return in the sunshine to share tales of the day. While the fisherman fish and the skiers ski, we all enjoy the plenitude of spring.

As I plan for a few days off from work, my options are almost limitless. Numerous mountain roads are open, countless peaks are waiting to be skied and California's Sierra Nevada had a record-breaking winter. I can only hope the freezing nighttime temperatures will hold and it won't get too warm during the day.

Flipping through a guidebook, I get ideas--a lot of ideas.

Should we head north or south, I wonder. The Onion Valley Road is open, Jon says. We could ski around Kearsarge or University Peak.

Both are good options for day hikes in the Southern Sierra and provide a variety of aspects and big descents. And, if we head south, we can go to Amigos in Bishop on the drive home for an enchilada autlan. Typically we plan our day around where we can eat after the adventure.

From our hometown of Mammoth Lakes, the Eastern Sierra backcountry is our playground, our escape.

We could go to the Buttermilks area, I say, and ski around Mt. Emerson, Mt. Locke, or Mt. Humphreys. Then we could stop at the Manor Market in Bishop for beer and fried chicken. Or we can pick up a marinated tri-tip from the Meat House and have a trailhead-tailgate barbecue.

But to the north there are more big peaks, high elevation roads, hot springs and plenty of good trout streams.

Last week, we skied Dunderberg Peak in the Bridgeport area, about an hour north of Mammoth. The descent is a classic and the snow was good, but the guacamole cheeseburger and vanilla dipped cone from Mono Cone that afternoon was even better.

We could ski somewhere near June Lake, Lee Vining or Tioga Pass, I say, and have lunch at the Mobil Station's Whoa Nellie Deli. It's famous for gourmet food and I love the fish tacos. Tioga Pass holds the regions most famous spring skiing. Descents from the Dana Plateau down Lee Vining Canyon can total more than 4,000 vertical feet and even more if you first summit Mt. Dana.

But Highway 120 to Tioga Pass still isn't open. It's going to be awhile before it's clear to the top and even longer until it's open through to Yosemite. If only it would stop snowing are words I would otherwise call heretical, but now, in late May, they somehow seem appropriate.

For now, the truck is packed with splitboards and fly rods. The camper is loaded with sleeping bags, a barbecue and a cooler of beer. We'll check the weather and cross our fingers for sunshine. And we'll head north or south depending on our cravings, whether they are for skiing, fishing or food.

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