Most mornings, breakfast at our place is no big thing. Push down a couple of slices of bread for toast, empty cereal into a bowl, chase it with a glass of OJ and ten minutes of CNN—you know the drill. It’s not that I don’t like to cook—hey, I love to cook—but elaborate breakfasts are mostly reserved for weekends. That’s when we do bacon and eggs, waffles, gussied-up grapefruit, a leisurely kipper on the terrace.

So it was with considerable interest that on a certain Thursday morning last summer I found myself in the rocking-and-rolling galley of a spiffy tourist train bound for the Canadian Rockies, cooking a breakfast of scrambled eggs wrapped in smoked salmon and topped with a leek cream sauce and caviar.

This temporary change in kitchen lifestyle began right after my sixty-seventh birthday, when a call came from the Rocky Mountaineer. Three times a week, all summer long (and a couple of times in the dead of winter), this twenty-two-car train takes loads of well-heeled tourists on a two-day railway adventure from Vancouver, British Columbia, to Banff and on to Calgary, Alberta, or to equally photogenic Jasper. A service that began a decade ago as the quirky, seemingly impossible dream of Vancouver entrepreneur Peter Armstrong, the train leaves Vancouver these days billed as “The Most Spectacular Train Trip in the World,” packed with gaga ladies and gents from all over. “The little train that could” became “the large train that did.”

While I have crossed Canada, much of Australia, and some of Europe by train, and enjoy the rattle of the rails almost as much as I do cooking, I have never cooked on a train, or for that matter, anywhere remotely resembling the food preparation area of a restaurant. My cooking has been confined to airy and stable—except for one untimely earthquake—kitchens with ergonomically designed appliances and sunny views to the south. All I know about food on trains is that it comes with great regularity through swinging doors with porthole windows, and that it’s invariably very good. Until last summer, it was only as a passenger that I had experienced the combination of food and trains.

So when the call came, presumably prompted by my frequent jaunts into food writing, I agreed. I would report for work at 5:30 a.m. a week hence for two days of work on the rails. My guide for the adventure would be Rocky Mountaineer Executive Chef Mark Jorundson, new to the job but well prepared for his role. Mark had been a “Canadian Apprentice of the Year” and had served in Anton Mossiman’s Belfry in London, at Alberta’s Fairmont Macdonald and the Delta Lodge in Kananaskis. Wear comfortable shoes, he said. The “whites”—hat and pants—would be supplied.

Each of the ten GoldLeaf dome cars on the Rocky Mountaineer seats seventy guests. Riding seventeen feet above the rails, they sit in air-conditioned comfort beneath wrap-over glass. Each dome car has its own thirty-six-seat dining room, and each dining room has its own galley, staffed by a team of three. Two attendants in the dome serve snacks and drinks and provide commentary on the trip. Two more prepare tables and serve in the dining room below.

Unlike the transcontinental Canadian trains of old, the Rocky Mountaineer travels only in daylight, providing, in any season and any weather, views of the lush flatslands of the Fraser Valley east of Vancouver, the tumultuous Fraser and Thompson River canyons, and the magnificent Rockies beyond. To take full advantage of the landscape, the Mountaineer stops at the end of the first day at Kamloops, roughly halfway across broad British Columbia. There a fleet of buses whisks guests off to local hotels and, if they wish, to a night of dinner-theatre in a local hall, while a team of more than one hundred tidies up the train and prepares it for its split journey on the second day to either Banff-Calgary or Jasper.

Like the passengers of old who spent the Rockies part of their trip in dark, rocking bunks, I too would see little of the outside world during my two days in the Mountaineer’s galley. There is no room for windows in a space crammed with ovens, refrigerators, freezers, food, crockery, cutlery, and everything else that it takes to run what is really a thirty-six-seat restaurant—two sittings for breakfast and two more for lunch.

I had no idea what it would be like to cook on a train, especially in a galley supplying meals to the Mountaineer’s
GoldLeaf Service guests, who had paid upwards of one thousand Canadian dollars for the two-day, one-way trip. My only wish was that I might be assigned to a non-intrusive task off in a corner, perhaps mincing parsley, boiling water, or making toast.

“Ever spun sugar?” We were on board, and the chef was testing my kitchen mettle.

I hadn’t. I wondered, in fact, what spun sugar had to do with breakfast, but soon learned that spinning sugar into elaborate decorations that would grace the tiramisu and cheesecake at lunch was just one example of the culinary economics aboard a train, where time and space count for everything. Breakfast and lunch preparation take place simultaneously. I quickly learned to reduce a mix of sugar and water over high heat into golden near-toffee, load it onto a teaspoon, and spin it, with Chef Mark’s guidance, onto parchment paper, forming a shining parade of sweet, flamboyant fans, enough for the two-day trip.

Behind me, our bums brushing often in the pre-dawn workspace, Chef Jay was loading the oven with seasoned Roma tomatoes. Jason, who would soon double as a dishwasher, was slicing the fruit that would begin our passengers’ day. Multi-tasking is everything on a train. Finding space to elaborately garnish thirty-six plates of fruit before someone else needs the same space to prepare a pork loin for lunch is a minute-by-minute challenge. Timing and rhythm become a way of life.

At seven, when the train jerked into motion, I learned with a decided bump why there had been so much activity in the preceding hour and a half. Movement would remain an awkward, unpredictable accompaniment to everything we did for the next two days. There is no way of knowing when the train will stop, go, or spiral with a squeal through a Rocky Mountain tunnel. Kitchen work is a constant test of the leg muscles, and of how quickly one can react to the completely unexpected. To help prevent spills and accidents, all the kitchen drawers have latches, and all surfaces are covered with rubber matting.
In the confined space of the galley, the floor is as unstable and unpredictable as a skateboard. Body contact is constant, and I learned early to read the minds and motions of my kitchen companions. Unlike the kitchen life that most of us know at home, everyone is involved in everything: cooking becomes a study in co-existence, directed ultimately to excellence in the dining car. Out here it can’t be “Get out of my kitchen!” because there’s no place to go except off. Instead it’s “What can I do to help?” Teamwork is never more important than it is on a train. You tend to say “thank you” a lot, and to outguess the others when things are needed. The rhythm of the rails quickly becomes the rhythm of the galley. What holds it together is the shared understanding that the passengers don’t need to know that the Dijon mustard demi-glace for the pork roast was accidentally toppled on a fast turn and had to be redone.

In addition to the aforementioned egg-salmon-caviar GoldLeaf Breakfast, the service offers four other choices to start the guests’ day. A bowl of granola? Only if you’re hungry hordes are invited to head downstairs for breakfast!

While experience helps in the preparation, the kitchen staff has no way of knowing just how many in the first sitting might order the GoldLeaf Breakfast, the granola, the steak, or whatever. We attempt to outguess what might happen, but if there’s a run on an item, we have to make more—knowing that as soon as the first sitting leaves, work must immediately begin for the second sitting, and for the lunch that will come a mere four hours later.

In addition to spinning sugar for lunch, I made thirty-six orders of three pancakes apiece on a searing grill, a couple of trays of blueberry and bran muffins, and scratch Hollandaise for the Eggs Benedict (trains can break a sauce! In addition to the New Amsterdam second). Oops! Sorry! Coming through! Behind you! Sharp knife! Watch your butt! Hot stuff! And I’m not just talking about the food!

When the orders started going out, I filled the granola and yogurt bowls, topped them with appropriate garnishes, and checked plate presentations for anything that might be less than perfect. For each sitting, we marked off a detailed mise en place. It quickly became obvious in this small working space—perhaps twenty by four feet—that everything had its precise place. Dishes returning from the dining room were quickly washed to be used again, as were utensils. Like good neighbors, galleys in adjacent domes sometimes borrowed from each other when they were short on an item, walkie-talkies providing a link.

For lunch on the first day out we made a tomato, orange, and avocado salad, topped with a savory crème fraîche to embellish it. We took baby shrimp from the fridge and mixed them with julienned daikon, carrot, and cucumber for a salad to be seasoned with raspberry vinaigrette. For the main course that day we roasted aged Alberta beef loin to serve with chopped vegetables and rich sauce. The beef would be one of five main-course choices, served above a track that clung to the walls of the Fraser Canyon—a route blasted more than a century ago to help forge Canada into an extremely wide nation. The other choices would be roast loin of pork, baked filet of trout, a vegetarian portobello mushroom filled with ratatouille and Parmesan cheese, and fusilli with juliennd breast of chicken. All for seventy people.

Under Jay’s guidance, I prepared one of the desserts, the tiramisu. Squirted arcs of mango, strawberry, and chocolate were feathered into a rooster tail of rainbow color before the rich rounds of tiramisu were positioned, dusted with cocoa powder, and topped with my beautiful spun sugar, a fanned tiramisu. Squirted arcs of mango, strawberry, and chocolate were feathered into a rooster tail of rainbow color before the rich rounds of tiramisu were positioned, dusted with cocoa powder, and topped with my beautiful spun sugar, a fanned tiramisu. Squirted arcs of mango, strawberry, and chocolate were feathered into a rooster tail of rainbow color before the rich rounds of tiramisu were positioned, dusted with cocoa powder, and topped with my beautiful spun sugar, a fanned tiramisu. Squirted arcs of mango, strawberry, and chocolate were feathered into a rooster tail of rainbow color before the rich rounds of tiramisu were positioned, dusted with cocoa powder, and topped with my beautiful spun sugar, a fanned tiramisu. Squirted arcs of mango, strawberry, and chocolate were feathered into a rooster tail of rainbow color before the rich rounds of tiramisu were positioned, dusted with cocoa powder, and topped with my beautiful spun sugar, a fanned tiramisu. Squirted arcs of mango, strawberry, and chocolate were feathered into a rooster tail of rainbow color before the rich rounds of tiramisu were positioned, dusted with cocoa powder, and topped with my beautiful spun sugar, a fanned tiramisu.

There were, of course, challenges. The passenger manifests recognize special diet requests, but there are always surprises. One of our passengers let it be known that while she wanted dessert, she couldn’t tolerate dairy products, and sugar and fat had to be kept to a minimum. The same rule applied to the following morning’s muffins, and to her request for “food to go” for a plane trip from Calgary. So Chef Mark and I cobbled together a gelatin-based dessert of strawberries and other fruit and made muffins with whatever we could find on board. Our passenger was delighted. So were passengers Ellen and Joe, who let it be known that they would love birthday cakes—later made by Jay from muffin mix, a coating of whipped cream, sliced strawberries, and an elegant cape gooseberry as a finishing touch.

In Kamloops, at the end of the first leg, I crashed exhausted onto the motel bed, which seemed to rock all night. While we slept, a supply team came on board to replenish a twenty-five-thousand-dollar food order from a list that had been sent on ahead. The provisions included fresh and frozen items, along with staples and everything else that a luxury train needs to deliver what it promises—without carrying excess inventory.

Up again at 4:45. The breakfast routine was repeated as we headed on through the ranchlands of the South Thompson to Shushwap Lake. By eight A.M., lunch preparation had already begun. Chef Mark was making a bread pudding to
end all bread puddings while I cross-hatched salmon steaks on the grill, holding them for a late burst in the oven. We also prepared lamb chops and roast breast of chicken. Lunch on the second day included a vegetarian strudel and penne with sautéed strips of beef tossed with vegetables in a tomato-basil cream sauce. The soup was made from wild British Columbia mushrooms and garnished with fresh tarragon and cream. Many of us have made similar soups at home, simmered long and blended smooth at the last minute with an injection of cream and a whirl of one of those nifty hand-held devices that turns lumps into velvet. Try power-blending scalding soup on a rocking train! The soup sits in a large stockpot on the floor; the blender is more like a seventy-five-horsepower Mercury outboard.

There was more food for the passengers every couple of hours. While the second sitting waited for lunch, we offered a cheese tray to tide them over. Mid-afternoon, we cooked and served gigantic chocolate chip cookies. On the run from Banff to Calgary, there were hot and cold hors d’oeuvres. Everything, of course, came from our galley.

Coming into Banff, a couple of us from the kitchen changed into clean whites, loaded up silver trays with maple-leaf-embossed chocolates, and headed upstairs to present them to our seventy appreciative guests. They gave us a standing ovation as we staggered down the aisle.

On the way back to Vancouver, my partner now beside me, I became a Rocky Mountaineer passenger—to marvel with others at the might of the mountains, to soar with spirited ospreys and eagles, to be in constant awe of the ingenuity of those who had built the line that we were now traveling in such luxurious comfort. Above us, through the glass, passengers in more of a hurry than we were made contrails in the summer sky. In the windowless galley below, my new kitchen friends spun sugar, stirred rich sauces, and made nothing but magic.

### Special-Order Muffins

**INGREDIENTS**

- 2 cups whole-wheat flour
- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 2 tablespoons baking powder
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ cup packed brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ¼ teaspoon ground allspice
- 2 eggs (or use 3 egg whites)
- 2 cups vanilla soy milk
- ½ cup molasses
- ½ cup vegetable oil
- 2 cups finely grated carrots
- 1 cup chopped walnuts
- 1 cup mixed dried apricots and cranberries

Preheat the oven to 375º F. In a large bowl mix together the flours, baking powder, salt, sugar, and spices. In a small bowl mix together the eggs, soy milk, molasses, and oil, then stir into the dry ingredients. Add the carrots, walnuts, and dried fruits. Bake in greased muffin tins for 20 minutes, or until lightly browned.

Makes 12 muffins.