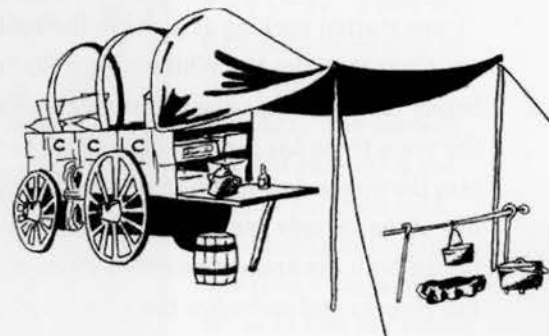


# THE BACKCOUNTRY COOK



Imagine yourself being transported into the mountains by an honest, sure-footed mule. Then, picture yourself at the end of this daydream being treated to a satisfying meal prepared by an experienced backcountry cook. Many of us share this happiest of dreams and some have even dined in the camp of a really skillful gourmet guide. Combine culinary talents with an endless knowledge of geology, archaeology, history, botany, geography, animal husbandry and yes, even psychology and you have the makings of one the wilderness' unsung heroes.

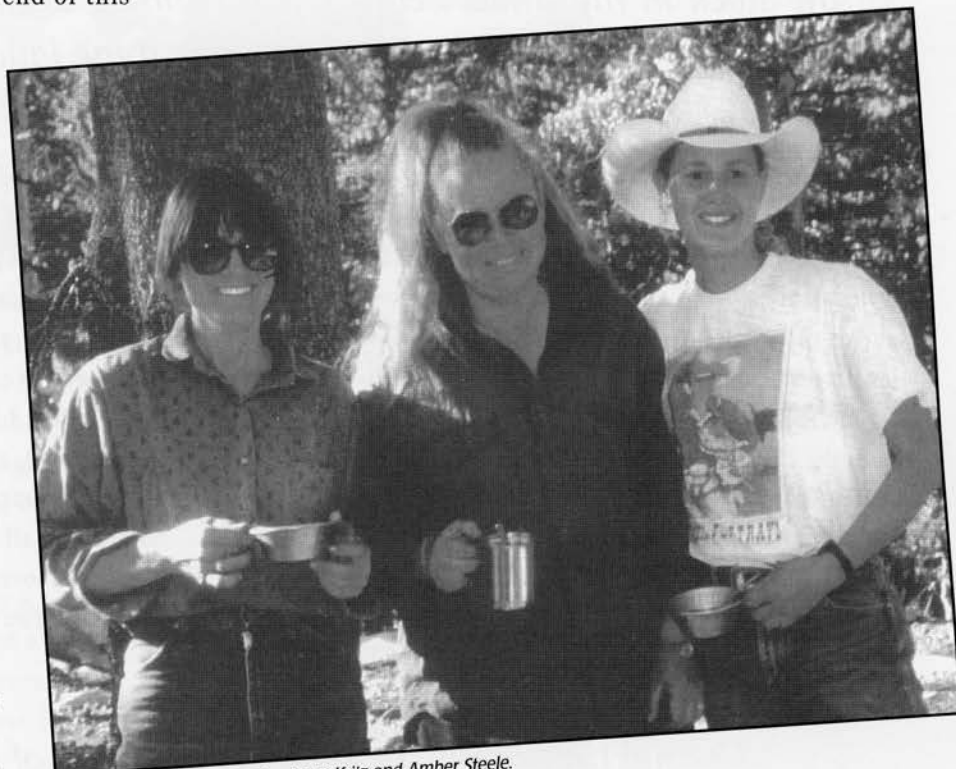
A backcountry cook is the hub of the camp. He or she is the nurse, counselor, father, mother, teacher and confidant. The cook can turn a bad trip good or make a difficult trip great.

Your camp kitchen is the comfort zone, gathering point and the place that makes your packing experience so unforgettable.

Learning to be a backcountry cook is a daunting task. It involves long hours, perpetual motion, an organized mind, confident demeanor and above all a rollicking good sense of humor.

With all that said, it stands to reason that the backcountry cook be honored by us as one of the most integral parts of our celebration. For to leave out the cook is to leave us hungry, without the camaraderie of a campfire and without another

spectacular tale about years gone by and the history of our beloved way of life.



(Left to Right) Jan Huffstutler, Irene Kritz and Amber Steele.

Mule Days is honoring the favorite backcountry cook with the Wynne Rieser award, named for Wynne Rieser due to her reputation as a wonderful, vibrant, outspoken and very capable backcountry cook. She was known for her "Tarzan" yell call to dinner and everyone called her Mom. Wynne taught a number of cooks in this area how to cook and make a backcountry kitchen come together. She spent over 20 years as a backcountry cook in this area. This year the winner of the Wynne Rieser Award for the Favorite Backcountry Cook is Irene "Mad Dog" Kritz of Lone Pine, CA!

Irene started packing as a girl in the 1960's for what was then the Mt. Whitney Pack Station before the portal was closed to stock traffic. Over the years Irene has never failed to find her way into the Sierra during the summer working for one of the various pack outfits. Irene has exemplified both the knowledge only an expert packer can possess and embodies the spirit needed to

when straight to setting up her kitchen, didn't say a word to me. When I had my work done and had gotten some wood for her I spent the rest of the time with the guests. By dinner time she was at least talking to the guests. As I was drifting off to sleep that night I figured she was just one of those odd characters that help make the Sierras what they are. The next thing I

*I jumped out of my bedroll, pulled on my boots, and started chasing the stock in my underwear. I was running around grabbing horses and all I could hear was Irene laughing.*

enable herself and others to survive and enjoy most any ordeal the mountains can provide. Irene specializes in the fine details of backcountry cooking providing fine meals, presented well and at the same time expressing thought towards low impact camp conservation and packing efficiency. She possesses an encyclopedic knowledge of birds, animals and local geology. As a teacher and people person Irene handles people's problems and needs with alacrity using her trademark dry sense of humor and sometimes stern admonitions against foolhardy behavior.

knew somebody was kicking me and I could hear bells and running horses. I threw back the tarp, looked up, and saw Irene standing over me getting ready to kick again. Instead she just looked down and calmly asked, 'Don't you think you ought to catch them?' I didn't have to think much, I jumped out of my bedroll, pulled on my boots, and started chasing the stock in my underwear. I was running around grabbing horses and all I could hear was Irene laughing. The next morning she poured me a cup of coffee and said, 'You might want to dress a little

*The next morning she poured me a cup of coffee and said, 'You might want to dress a little warmer if you're going to be working horses at night.'*

Matthew Taylor writes, "The night before an all-expense trip, my boss, Bob Tanner, told me some lady named Irene was going to cook on the trip and then he kind of laughed the way he does when a packer ought to get nervous. I met Irene that next morning as I was packing up. She wasn't mean but she sure wasn't friendly either. When we got to the first camp Irene

warmer if you're going to be working horses at night.' Smiling, she went off to get breakfast going. One morning she was watching me as I tried to jump on my horse bareback and the horse stepped hard towards me sending me clear over him onto my back under his belly. As I was looking up at my horse's underside I heard her say, 'You sure got a way with horses' cowboy.' For dessert the last night she brought



Rock Creek. I was very fortunate to be able to go on some long trips with her. She showed me that she was a goddess of patience with demanding dudes and one time even went so far as to give her tennis shoes to a hiker with blistered feet. Irene always has a joke, a fun song, reverence for the mountains and love for the mules that help us along the trail. Her years of experience, expertise and fabulous cooking skills have

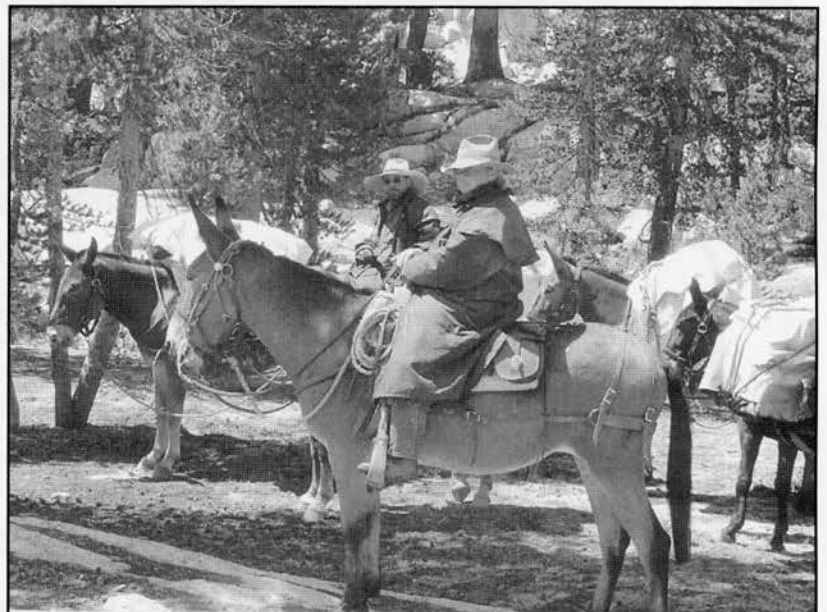
out a gingerbread cake that must have been 6" high. It sure tasted good and the guests could n't believe that she had baked it in her Dutch oven. There wasn't a bit left. On the ride home I got my lunch out of my saddle bags. When I looked in the bag there was a piece of gingerbread cake on top."

Cheryl Lane says, "Besides being a great cook, Irene always has a smile and a little yarn to tell. Jokes – she's got 'em. Bears – no problem for Irene. She's been nose-to-nose with them many times and always seems to come out on top with little grub taken (so she says)."

Jan Huffstutler says, "I first met Irene in the summer of 1984. It was my very first season and also my first trip. We were in the Rush Creek drainage and I had unknowingly aced her out of the prime camp site. She rode into our camp on her big grey horse with her long hair flowing free in the afternoon breeze. She just glared at me and then went to talk to my packer. I felt her presence, large and looming, she kind of scared me. Over the seasons I got to know Irene because we both worked together at

gained her due respect from co-workers and guests alike.

Tom Allewelt writes, "I have many stories of both hardship and good times with Irene mostly as a still 'new' packer in the early 90's. One of my first experiences with slick rock involved Irene and Marge London who passed away this last year. I believe we were somewhere on the other side of Isberg Pass in Yosemite at the end



of a long day reaching that point one figures the worst of the trail is over and thoughts drift toward camp sites when suddenly horses and mules started sliding and falling without warning. Irene was behind me rolling off her downed mule and coming up all in one motion. Marge in front coming off with her foot stuck in the stirrup. When it was all over the experience basically left me petrified. What really struck me at the time was when I noticed Marge and Irene laughing and giggling like a couple of entertained school-girls. I was humbled and learned a little about

packer savvy that day Irene still prefers the big traveling trips. We've had a 28 day John Muir trail trip in our brochure lately that we essentially divided into two 14 day trips in order to give the crew and some of the animals a break. Irene really didn't like the idea of doing only half a trip so of course she insisted on doing the whole thing. There are certainly many candidates for the honor of favorite backcountry cook but considering her lifetime of experience and commitment to the packing industry I can't think of anyone more qualified or worthy for the position."

**Irene Kritz Statistics**

**Longest trip worked:** 28 days – Tioga to Horseshoe Meadows – Fall 2001

**Biggest trip cooked:** Sierra Club High Trip – 117 people for 14 days – 1968

**Highest elevation ridden:** 14,496' Top of Mt. Whitney, the last of the pack trips before the trail was closed to stock.

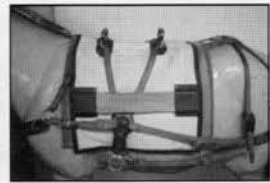
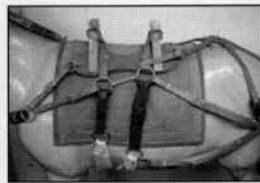
**Parts of the Sierra covered:** the entire John Muir trail, the Eastern Sierra from Kennedy Meadows to Kennedy Meadows including Yosemite Valley, Cedar Grove and Mineral King.

Irene has spent almost 40 years cooking in the High Sierra.

**Butte Creek Outfitters**

Custom Made Saddles & Tack  
Quality Pack & Camp Equipment

*-Western Ways For Modern Days-*



**Custom Hand Crafted Saddles**  
Starting at \$2600

**In addition** to our full line of packing and riding gear, we carry many mule-specific items. We sell Montana Canvas wall tents and spike tents, cast iron or aluminum dutch ovens, Riley camp stoves, cowboy and packer bedrolls, pack saws with leather scabbards, pack scales, leather rifle scabbards, a huge selection of hobbles, leather saddle bags and horn bags, Double Diamond rope halters and trail halters, coats, jackets, jeans, and shirts by Carhart, premium outdoor clothing, hats, and luggage from Filson, Hathorn Boots, White's Pacs boots, beautiful sterling silver jewelry over 500 book titles in stock!

**SAWBUCK & DECKER PACK SADDLES**

Classic Sawbuck \$440.95 Classic Decker \$550.95

Fully Rigged Brass Hardware - Lined Breeching and Breast Collar

We make several styles of Canvas and Leather Panniers for both systems from \$329.95 per pair. We carry Aluminum and Plastic Pannier Boxes from \$285.95 per pair

We also have burro saddles and panniers!

**Stop by our booth or call for a free catalog!**

1543 Highway 99, Gridley, CA 95948

(530) 846-0947 Fax (530) 846-7927

Store Hours Monday - Friday 8:30 to 6:30 & Saturday 9 to 5

E-mail: [bco@cncnet.com](mailto:bco@cncnet.com) [www.buttecreekoutfitters.com](http://www.buttecreekoutfitters.com)

Authorized Dealer for:

