

at home in albuquerque

*Can the traditional and the modern live happily side by side?
A thriving culinary climate proves it can.* / BY DEBORAH GROSSMAN

albuquerque brings to mind hot-air balloon festivals and nostalgic drives down Route 66. Before these pastimes appeared, traders and farmers settled in the area for agricultural pursuits. Later, workers arrived to build railroads and conduct research at Sandia National Laboratories and the University of New Mexico. Meanwhile, Santa Fe developed into a tourist and upscale-dining mecca. But now the Albuquerque area boasts a range of visitor activities and a bustling food and beverage scene.

At Los Poblanos Historic Inn and Organic Farm located a few miles from downtown Albuquerque, executive chef Jonathan Perno takes a broad view of the area's culinary offerings. "We have coined the term 'Rio Grande Valley Cuisine,' which best represents our style of food. It's not 'Southwestern' or 'New Mexican' food, although we feature many native ingredients like green and red chiles, native beans and corn," says Perno.

Even McDonald's menus the area's culinary history with green chile burgers. Traditional dishes such as blue corn pancakes, bolitos and roasted green chile stew highlight the Native American, Mexican and Spanish influences on Albuquerque cuisine. Yet modern touches, from foie gras confit au torchon to pistachio-crusting vegetarian steak, appear on the area's menus.

The Spanish-influenced food at Lucia in the downtown Hotel Andaluz highlights paella Valenciana as a featured starter. But one of the most popular lunch sandwiches is the grilled Burque turkey sandwich. "We native folks call the city 'Burque,'" says Hotel Andaluz executive chef Mike Von Blomberg. "We layer the turkey with local basil/goat cheese spread, spinach and green chile aioli."

green or red?

Any discussion of the heritage of New Mexican cuisine boils down to green chile, the state's unique contribution to spicy food. Not widely distributed outside New Mexico, the aroma of roasting Hatch chiles at harvest time draws tourists and locals alike to the Downtown Growers Market and local stores to purchase the peppers. The epicenter for the harvest of the mild-to-hot green Sandia chile, aka the Hatch chile, is the Southern New Mexico town of Hatch and the surrounding valley.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: 1) Casa de Ruiz Church Street Cafe's guacamole with sangria. 2) Hatch chiles. 3) Casa Rondeña Winery. 4) A pretzel burger at Hotel Andaluz. 5) Route 66 runs through the heart of Albuquerque.

PHOTO CREDIT: Clockwise from top left: 1) Deborah Grossman 2) Hatch Chile Company 3) Deborah Grossman 4) Sergio Salvador 5) MarbleStreetStudio.com



REGIONAL CUISINE at home in albuquerque

Centuries ago, Native American Indians were cooking with the three sisters: corn, beans and squash. The Navajo and Apache planted the sisters together to harness a natural, beneficial environment. Beans grew up the tall corn stalks while the squash plants served as ground cover to keep water from evaporating from the dry soil.

“Food on the New Mexico pueblos was an original fusion cuisine,” says Mike Iannone, food and beverage director at the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center in Albuquerque. “The Mexicans brought in their tribal food, and then the Spanish arrived.”

Iannone and his staff help preserve Pueblo culinary traditions for Indian tribal events and Feast Days, schoolchildren and the public at the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center. The center’s Pueblo Harvest Café & Bakery serves Indian toast made with housemade oven bread and green chile/pinon butter. Oven bread, explains Iannone, came to Indian culture from the Spanish, who learned the technique from the Moors. The café’s dinner menu includes such specialties as elk tenderloin with blue corn/green chile pancakes, and Tewa taco, a ground beef and bean mix served on pueblo-style fry bread.

The area’s agricultural roots are manifest at the Downtown Growers Market. For six months a year, the first solar-powered farmers market sets up shop near Route 66 with 65 New Mexico growers and 25 food stalls. The Downtown Growers Market is an active partner with the development of the Alvarado Urban Farm a few blocks from Hotel Andaluz. The mission of the farm is to be a food hub where both culinary professionals and residents can grow and buy food.

THE ALBUQUERQUE WINE TRAIL

With vineyards first planted in 1629, New Mexico claims heritage as the birthplace of American winemaking. The hot, sunny days and cool, high-desert nights enable grapes to thrive along the Rio Grande and in southern areas of the state. Catholic monks chose an Indian pueblo in Southern New Mexico to plant Mission grapes, the same vines later brought to California. In 1880, New Mexico was a leading wine producer, but production dropped dramatically over the next century. About 30 years ago, winemakers rediscovered the terroir and planted new vineyards.

John Calvin, a descendent of the 16th century John Calvin who influenced religious history, has impacted the turnaround of New Mexican wine history. He established Casa Rondeña Winery in 2005 and believes that the state is capable of making quality wine. The winery, on the east side of Albuquerque, is marked on the New Mexico wine trail that links the state’s 42 wineries.

“The idea of making wine in the Rio Grande Valley was fascinating. It is too cool to grow many red varietals, but we discovered we can grow Gewurztraminer and Viognier with

“I live downtown and pass the market on the way to work. I’ll stop and buy what’s fresh for Lucia,” says Von Blomberg. He makes tri-squash risotto during the season and entrees such as smoked New Mexico beef filet with Spanish sherry jus. Green chile stew with local pork loin is always on the menu.

heritage cooking

The 20-room Los Poblanos Inn’s property includes a 25-acre working organic farm that participates in the Albuquerque Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) fresh produce program. The farm also supplies the kitchen with organic tepary beans that are native to the Indian pueblos, cardoons, figs, parsley roots, beets, jujube dates, epazote, mushrooms and other produce.

Perno makes full use of the farm’s eggs, pork and honey in dishes such as pork belly, beets with green chile, toasted coriander and New Mexico chevre. He also serves a heritage New Mexican dish rarely seen on menus: chile bolitos—pork and beef meatballs with chile, currants, Mexican pecans, cinnamon and fresh herbs, dipped in egg batter, fried, and served with caramel dipping sauce.

Nestled behind San Felipe de Neri Parish in the heart of Old Town, the Casa de Ruiz Church Street Café is reportedly the oldest structure in Albuquerque and one of the oldest in the state. Appetizers include nachos de Rio Grande or the famous Bandito Pie made with Frito chips smothered in beef and beans with chile sauce. When customers order the signature handmade tamale plate, the classic New Mexico question is: Red or green chile? If guests want both, they reply, “Give me Christmas.”

character,” Calvin says. The Casa Rondeña Meritage, a classic Bordeaux blend, is especially food-friendly.

Gruet Winery is arguably the best-known winery in New Mexico. In the 1980s, the founder of the Gruet Champagne house couldn’t expand in France and decided to purchase land in America. Learning of the 17th century vineyards, the soil, altitude and climate, the Gruets planted vineyards 100 miles south of Albuquerque. The Gilbert Grande Reserve is full-bodied with smooth textural balance, and at under \$50, a value among sparkling wines.

Fifth-generation vintner Hervé Lescombes of Domaine de Perignon in France is another Frenchman attracted to New Mexico. St. Clair Winery & Bistro venues are located in Albuquerque and throughout the state. The company makes 50 wines—blends, single varietals and specialty bottlings—under labels such as St. Clair, Blue Teal and higher-end D.H. Lescombes. Hatch Green Chile wine, a white blend with Hatch chiles, spices up the specialty portfolio.

Though Cecilia's Cafe is young compared with Casa de Ruiz, with just a dozen years in Albuquerque, Cecilia Baca is known for her recipe for *carne adovada*, chunks of pork marinated in red chile. Beans and chicharrón (fried pork rind) are served on a sopaipilla or burrito. For a fun American twist, a sopaipillaburger features a quarter-pound burger inside a warm tortilla.

Sadie's opened in 1954 as a diner in an area that was then considered on the outskirts of town. Sadie's nephew William Stafford, one of the managers, describes the food at the bustling 320-seat restaurant as Native American style with Mexican influences. To satisfy customer demand for home versions of the salsa, Sadie's produces salsa in partnership with Hatch Chile Co.

The kitchen uses 400 pounds of hand-cut potatoes daily for the signature fried potatoes with diced onions and chiles that accompany platters. The fried sopaipillas made with a masa base are known throughout the area.

El Pinto is the largest restaurant in New Mexico. With 1,200 seats in four inside dining rooms and on five outside patios, the maze of rooms is served by well-trained staff who share their passion for table-made guacamole. Twin brothers John and Jim Thomas carry on the tradition their parents started when they opened the tiny El Pinto (the spot) in 1962. The most popular entrees are green chile/chicken enchiladas and stuffed sopaipillas.

Given their passion for New Mexican chiles, the twins built a plant behind the restaurant, where they roasted and peeled approximately 253 tons of chiles last year—76 tons for the restaurant and 177 tons to make the well-known El Pinto retail and foodservice green and red salsas and green chile sauce.

beer pubs

Casual dining in Albuquerque often equates to brewery dining. Some breweries, such as La Cumbre Brewing Co., serve only beer. But La Cumbre Malpais Stout, says owner Jeff Erway, is “a meal in a glass.” Brewed with seven different malts, the flavor impact is creamy and intense.

Ten miles north of town, Chama River head brewer Justin Hamilton produces award-winning brews such as 3 Dog Night porter and Rio Chama Amber Ale, a cult favorite made with a blend of pale, toasted and caramel malts.

Chama River executive chef Stephen Shook crafts a beer-friendly menu. The truffled “bleu cheese” fries and Southwest

pot pie with roast chicken in green chile gravy are lunch favorites. Beer pairing dinners may include grilled buffalo meatloaf, stout-battered fish and chips, or elk steak.

IVB Canteen is the newest outpost of the nine-unit Il Vicino Wood Oven Pizza chain from Il Vicino Brewing Co. (IVB). The pub is a working brewery serving Pigtail Pilsner, Slow Down Brown ale and others. But the food is also a draw. Beer Sponge consists of two large pretzels with IVB Lusty Monk beer chipotle mustard. The Sauce Hog sandwich is slathered with IPA-infused barbecue sauce.

modern new mexican

Maxime Bouneou realized his dream of sharing his Italian heritage and culinary training by opening Torinos' at Home in a business district of Albuquerque. The trattoria serves classic European food such as foie gras au torchon with sweet onion preserve, applewood-smoked duck breast and arugula. But Bouneou also turns a classic duck confit appetizer into a salad with spinach, hard-boiled egg, goat cheese, raspberry vinaigrette and, for a Southwestern touch, caramelized chili pecans.

Last summer, Bouneou launched a set five-course menu. But, he says, “Albuquerqueans weren't quite ready for a prix fixe menu. Albuquerque still has a small Western town feel, and people didn't seem to want a five-course meal. So we went back to a more traditional formula and now serve a la carte dinners with a few specials.”

Albuquerque is a food city that is constantly honoring the past and reaching for innovation. At the Hotel Andaluz, recently remodeled with historic murals intact, Von Blomberg adds a Mediterranean-Albuquerquean touch to the menu by stretching his own mozzarella and then serving it with peach marmalade and green chile salsa. At Ibiza, the hotel's rooftop bar, he may serve gazpacho shooters with a touch of watermelon sweetness in cucumber cups. In the fine-dining Lucia, he menus dishes such as New Mexico flat iron steak with sweet potato fries and pickled peppers in a balsamic steak sauce.

For dessert, Von Blomberg lists orange/chocolate/caramel flan served in a martini glass, but, he adds, “We don't normally make green chile ice cream. Our visitors from around the world may not know it. But we may put it on the menu as a special, because our locals enjoy it. Chile is what we're about.” 🍷

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