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# Earth to Earth

**Chef Jonathan Perno's Rio Grande Valley Cuisine honors the timeless agricultural history of Los Poblanos**

BY CAT REECE

PHOTOS BY DOUGLAS MERRIAM

Entering the narrow cottonwood-lined road to the historic grounds of Los Poblanos, you might forget the city of Albuquerque sprawls just to the east. Fragrant, idyllic purple mounds of lavender fill the fields, while peacocks and alpacas wander by. Life becomes a little slower and this bucolic atmosphere inspires guests to start savoring their experience right from the gate. The sights, scents, and sounds invite exploration, relaxation, and—perhaps best of all—feasting. This is the perfect beginning to a story that ends in a meal at the much-lauded Los Poblanos restaurant, Campo.

Chef Jonathan Perno is the creator behind the flavors of Campo. Over the past 12 years at this location he has drawn national attention, including receiving multiple nominations for the coveted James Beard Foundation award from 2013 to the present. Chef Perno, however, remains down-to-earth in the most literal sense possible—through the constant and comprehensive application of his farm-to-table philosophy that began with firsthand experience in organic raised-bed farming. He had already been working in a kitchen for a year when he decided to try his hand at farming in Berkeley, California, which helped him build a stronger culinary foundation. “I always try to learn as many aspects about what I do through others and through the work of other people,” he says. “I farmed for a year, and I got to understand how the seeds work, and the importance of soil building and soil maintenance. That’s the true foundation of food. A lot of people take from the Earth, but they don’t give back, and I got to understand how I could change that.”

Through his practice sourcing ingredients and developing recipes, Perno tries to mend this rift between people and the Earth. He sees his role as chef being that of a mediator between producers and consumers. “When I was farming, I learned that being a chef isn’t just about the creation aspect, it’s about staying faithful in how we present the ingredients. It is more important to me now that we carry and preserve the integrity of the producer



Chef Jonathan Perno of Campo at Los Poblanos



Clockwise from top left: Guest rooms and lavender fields at Los Poblanos Historic Inn & Organic Farm; serving a craft cocktail at Campo; kitchen grill station; Campo's dining area.



Chilled beet soup with garlic scape crema

into the kitchen,” he says, “and that my team and I respect what these individuals are producing for us to work with, and extend that to the guest.” Because of this, Perno considers every possible aspect of any single ingredient and how each part of something can be used.

This also includes the local meats that make their way to his kitchen. “That’s the way we work here. We even process our own fats. We use everything,” he says. “My training as a butcher means that I’m in a position to teach my team how to use the whole animal in a very respectful manner and not take it for granted, like some people do when they cherry-pick specific small cuts and discard others. Using the whole animal promotes greater creativity.”

Perno’s kitchen rests upon the bounty of the Rio Grande Valley and the individuals who help yield it. “Some of my producers have been with me for 13 years. Others have been with me for over 30 years. They’re the ones I’ve taken with me through my journey. We’ve built this solid relationship that we keep making stronger.”

This allows Perno to maintain local fidelity when sourcing ingredients. Instead of relying on national food distributors, he works with La Montañita Co-Op Distribution Center, which accesses a 300-mile area for him. This integrity to local sources may cost more, but Perno uses his knowledge to keep costs low by adhering to his belief in using the whole of an item. “Because of my training, I’ve learned how to take that higher price point and bring it closer to what a conventional product would cost overall, because we don’t waste anything.”

Though Perno’s odyssey in the world of the culinary arts has taken him the world over, he is a New Mexico native who never forgot his origins. By returning home to explore the various cultures that make New Mexican cuisine unique, he keeps alive a set of deep culinary roots that go back to the state’s territorial period—and beyond. Los Poblanos itself has ancient roots that connect the Anasazi, Spanish settlers, and those who established the farm under the Elena Gallegos Land Grant of the 1700s. Perno says, “On this land, I’m surrounded

with what was here before, be it Native culture, Hispanic culture, or the Europeans that moved through this part of the country as they were migrating West.” He travels to Mexico for learning and inspiration and maintains ongoing dialogue with representatives from local Pueblos to help him understand heritage farming methods. “Los Poblanos is using that information, and we’re digging huge pits to cure corn so we can have it in the summer months. I lean a lot on these ideas.” Perno endeavors to incorporate these aspects into his cooking, relying as much as possible on heritage strains of agriculture that were born in this state. “We focus on using these native ingredients that have a history here. They were created here for this high-desert environment, for drought and heat tolerance.”

In the early stages of his time at Campo, Perno wanted to find the best way to describe the unique flavors and cuisine being created by his team. “We started to struggle with what we were going to call what we do with the food, and finally it hit me: Rio Grande Valley Cuisine. We expanded on that, because when it comes down to it, we’re not really Southwestern. I don’t feel that’s our label. We have this corridor north to south from the Rio Grande that has amazing stuff to offer this state, such as heritage produce, breeds, and farming techniques. This place has its own identity within itself.” This identity of melded cultures, of vast histories and peoples, can be tasted in the kitchen in the form of traditional ingredients that are hard to find anywhere else.

One of the lesser-known spices he likes to incorporate into his dishes is *epazote*, also known as Mexican tea, along with other more familiar botanicals. “I’ve been experimenting with blending it with other herbs, such as catnip. For example, when cooking mushrooms, these spices can really accentuate the earthiness and nuances in the flavor profile.” Perno says that the “holy trinity” of New Mexican cooking are the three ingredients that help define the base of Rio Grande Valley flavors. “You can’t go wrong with the Three Sisters combination,” he says, referring to

a native gardening technique involving corn, beans, and squash. “They become a self-contained ecosystem and nurture each other to become bountiful.” These are staples in Perno’s ever-rotating menu, which mirrors the seasons and availability of produce. In true Rio Grande fashion, blue corn specifically is a constant feature ingredient. “And of course,” he adds, “you can’t forget chile.”

Diners at Campo will experience the way these flavors are enhanced when cooked over a live fire. Dishes featuring homemade pastas, seasonal local vegetables, and fresh farm-raised meat abound. The springtime menu boasts Shepherd’s Lamb Mole Rojo, a rack of lamb with a braised neck tamale, featuring New Mexico’s only certified organic lamb. The farm’s own lavender makes frequent appearances as well, such as in the Lavender Chicken Breast, which features a blue corn polenta accompaniment.

Perno’s philosophy extends from craft to process, and finally to community. He pushes against the stigma that farm-to-table is an elite movement, and strives to make it something that is available to everyone. “I just want to feed people, and I want to feed them well. Everyone should have access to quality food. If I’m going to be in this industry, and I’m going to do this, and people are going to pay for it, I need to do it with quality ingredients and the care that it takes to prepare something well.” He believes that New Mexico is an ideal place to develop this idea, because of the state’s deep roots in farming. “We are lucky here, because even though our state has widespread poverty, we also have a better connection with food here because of the ongoing agricultural aspects.” The locally sourced ingredients that Campo leans on helps foster this connection between the consumer and the land.

It is Chef Perno’s focus on relationship integrity that truly sets the experience at Campo apart. From the producer to the kitchen and all the way to the plate, guests can be assured that they are experiencing food the way it was meant to be in a holistic, organic, and curated experience that is different here than anywhere in the world. ✿