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THE STORY OF LOCAL FOOD, SEASON BY SEASON

Rituals

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LOCAL HEROES

PENNY REMBE

OLLA AWARD

The Olla Award recognizes individuals who have made significant contributions in the realm of good food work in New Mexico, and who are creating a more robust local food system. Nominations are submitted by the general public and the winner is determined by the *edible* team.



Penny Rembe at Los Poblanos Historic Inn & Farm. Photo by Stephanie Cameron.

"Albuquerque has been my home for more than sixty years. My husband, Armie, and I fell in love with the art, food, and people here and busied ourselves with becoming part of the community. Being involved in the community has been one of my greatest joys," says Penny Rembe, who wears the affectionate label of matriarch of Los Poblanos Historic Inn & Farm. "After years of volunteering, I became a serial entrepreneur. I opened Pennysmiths Paper and the Valley Deli, started a catering business and the New Mexico Catalog—just to name a few!" Her *querencia*, the place from which she draws her strength and feels most at home, is the inn and organic farm in Los Ranchos de Albuquerque where three generations of her family work together. Armin's bees, lavender fields, enormous cottonwood trees, and formal gardens complement the grounds. Reflecting on

where Los Poblanos is now, Rembe shared that they recently hosted the 2023 James Beard Foundation Chef Bootcamp for Policy and Change. In addition to dining, she said, the visiting chefs "learned how to butcher a lamb and cook it in a pit." She also recalled the delicious food, fine wine, and interesting people and conversation at this year's Lavender Harvest Dinner at La Quinta. "Dinner for eighty was under the portal on a long table decorated with pear branches with fresh pears and other fruits from the farm. . . . It really was amazing—and that is just one night on the farm."

You and Armin have spent a half century at Los Poblanos. Describe your memories of first setting foot on the property. Did you know those twenty-five acres would become your life's work?



Penny and Emily Benak, Penny Rembe, Matthew Rembe, and Armin Rembe at the groundbreaking for restaurant and guest room renovations in 2016. Photo courtesy of Los Poblanos.

When the Simms family decided to sell Los Poblanos in the seventies, Armie and I jumped at the chance to purchase the beautiful property. Our impression was WOW! Trees, gardens, a pond, a farm, fields, barns—what could be a more wonderful life and place to raise a family? We moved with our four children into the ranch house—now the Hacienda Spa—while Armie’s sister, her husband, and their five children made the La Quinta building their home. Years later, they moved to Ireland, so we took over the whole twenty-five acres, and then tried to figure out how we could keep it and preserve it. Ponies, sheep, goats, chickens, and lots of gardens kept us busy.

We created an agricultural trust that preserves most of the land in the fields. We turned our house into a B&B. Our friends thought we were nuts! I cooked breakfast for five years; Katherine Kagel from Cafe Pasqual’s helped me with my breakfast menu. Armie did the evening check-ins.

One of our greatest joys is that we get to work together as a family. We have a family board with all the kids—Emily, Armin, Jay, and Matt, with Matt, our youngest, leading as director. With the support of his siblings, Matt began with what Armie and I started and has taken it to a level that I could not have imagined. Matt’s passion for preservation, innovation, and creativity, and his ability to put together a team of the very best people have made Los Poblanos what it is today. I could not be more proud.

Talk about your relationship with lavender and your vision for developing agritourism in New Mexico.

I was on the Agricultural Committee in the village, and preserving the agricultural lifestyle in Los Ranchos became even more important as farmland disappeared. We researched what we could easily grow here—what took little water, full sun, average soil—and lavender was the perfect crop! It was beautiful and fragrant, and we could build a festival around it and make value-added products, and it could be a draw for the village.

Agritourism was a relatively new idea at the time, so we were finding our way. Armie and I visited Sequim, Washington, and Provence, France, and we tested different styles of lavender that would do best here. Growing lavender has created a village festival that has hosted thousands of people and resulted in more lavender being planted on village land—beautiful fields and great products for Los Poblanos.

Los Poblanos is known for its strong relationships with local farmers, butchers, and herdsmen. How has sourcing local food changed since the inn and restaurant first opened their doors?

When we first opened the inn, I was making breakfast for guests. With just six rooms, that might be two to twelve people any given day. I loved it. We did simple farm breakfasts with scrambled eggs, scones, fresh fruit, and bacon or baked Southwest strata. We had chickens and Armie would bring in eggs every morning. We were supplement-



Armin and Penny Rembe. Photo by Sergio Salvador.

ing with trips to the grocery store and working with local caterers for private events, but a lot of the food came from the property.

At the time, we were leasing the fields to local farmers who wanted to grow organically. We had Erda Gardens and Monte from Skarsgard Farms on site, so they would supply some of the vegetables and run their CSAs here. A few others who worked here were the Silverblatts (Silver Leaf Farm), Seth from Vida Verde Farm, and Ric from Sol Harvest. That's one of the things we're most proud of—so many young farmers got their start in our fields, either back then or as interns on the farm over the years. So now, we can help sustain an economy that supports small farmers by buying fruit, vegetables, and artisan products from them to serve at Campo or sell in the Farm Shop.

Los Poblanos is closely connected to Albuquerque's food community, but it's also well known nationally as a top travel destination for food lovers. How do you balance the two?

We try to just do what we do best and put all of our love for the place into everything. I think that comes through. We balance between making the space available and accessible to the community and also providing a true escape and sense of privacy for guests that are staying with us. I think what draws both locals and visitors is the real sense of place. Locals love the views of the Sandias overlooking lavender fields

or cranes in the winter just as much as people from out of town. You just can't experience food, architecture, and landscape together quite like this anywhere else in the county.

How do the history, landscape, and architecture of Los Poblanos influence the community's experience of the property, including the cuisine served there?

We're lucky to have such a unique mix of experiences on the same property. You can be out in the fields and run into Wes or Max, who love to hand out fresh herbs to taste or honey straight from the hives. Then sit down at Campo and experience food from the fields and ingredients from around the state while sitting in an original renovated dairy barn—or have a five-course, wine-paired dining experience at La Quinta, one of the most elegant John Gaw Meem buildings in New Mexico. It's all here, the flavors, architecture, and agriculture, all on a piece of land that has been farmed for hundreds of years by all kinds of people.

Describe a perfect day on the property.

A perfect day for me is zooming around in my golf cart, checking on things, speaking to the guests, picking some tomatoes, cutting roses, seeing little kids hiding under the weeping mulberry tree, having friends and family over for drinks and dinner. And in bed by seven. 🍷