

# Melting Pot

TRADITIONS OLD AND NEW  
FUSE IN NEW MEXICO'S CULINARY LANDSCAPE

BY NANCY ZIMMERMAN

**A**mere 30 years ago, when duck was still something you ate primarily à l'orange in high-end restaurants and a quesadilla was just the Mexican version of a toasted cheese sandwich, it hadn't yet occurred to anyone that the tang of a killer chile sauce and the chewy goodness of a freshly made tortilla might marry well with the flavors and textures of highbrow fare. It wasn't until 1987, when renowned restaurateur Mark Miller opened his landmark Santa Fe restaurant, Coyote Café, that the duck quesadilla was born, and along with it an entirely new genre of cooking: upscale Southwestern.

The marriage seemed a groundbreaking one at the time, but it shouldn't have. Fusion cuisine—the blending of cooking styles and ingredients from different countries and traditions—existed in the Southwest many centuries before it came to dominate the sophisticated culinary scene of the late-20th and early-21st centuries.

When the first Spanish explorers arrived in the 1500s, bringing with them their staples of nuts, oils, cheeses, meats, and wine, they found the Native residents regularly giving thanks to the Creator for the gifts of corn, squash, and beans. Known as the Three Sisters, this triumvirate was notable not only for its nutritional balance, but also for its symbiotic ability to ensure a more successful crop when all three were planted together. Their flashier little sister, chile, was brought north from today's Mexico via ancient trade routes to add its own nutritious and tongue-tingling punch to the mix, while other New World crops like tomatoes, potatoes, vanilla, avocados, and chocolate were making the rounds as well. Once fused, the Native and Spanish cooking traditions produced the familiar staples still found today on menus throughout the region, from green chile stew to *carne adovada* to chicken enchiladas.

But there's more to Southwest cuisine than the hardworking fare of centuries past, and nowhere is that more gratifyingly evident than in Northern New Mexico. While chefs the world over experiment with everything from molecular gastronomy to bacon-wrapped cheesecake in an attempt to invent the Next Big Thing, savvy cooks flock here to take advantage of our age-old assets. Inherent hospitality, an enduring reverence for the land and its bounty, and an atmosphere of discovery and invention all fuel the creative inspiration of those who have chosen to immerse themselves in heirloom vegetables, grass-fed local meats, and fruit from nearby orchards, far from the stress of overly competitive colleagues and snarky restaurant critics of major metropolitan areas.

The resulting cuisine is innovative and exciting, not merely trendy. Chef Patrick Gharrity of La Casa Sena, for example, invigorates the classic Caesar

Museum Hill Café's Old World Sampler features the flavors that have been staples of Southwestern and Mexican cooking for centuries. Paired with one of their wine flights, it makes for a wonderful lunch, either before or after touring the museums.



salad with a dressing of red chile and lime, and his pan-seared salmon filet sports a mocha crust in a mole sauce. Xavier Grenet of Ristra brightens black Mediterranean mussels with chipotle and mint, and the savory pork rack comes with a piñon sage brioche, a New Mexican twist on a French favorite. At Midtown Bistro, Angel Estrada introduces a Southwestern flair to dishes like his calamari with citrus chipotle aioli and habanero pineapple sauce.

Today's wine scene also owes a debt to history: New Mexico is the oldest commercial wine-growing region in the country, more than a century ahead of California. The Franciscan monks who accompanied the conquistadors to New Spain brought with them a vine known as the "mission grape" to supply themselves with sacramental wine, and the country's first wine-growing region was born.

The grapevines were planted initially in 1629 at an Indian pueblo south of present-day Socorro, and by 1800 cultivation had extended all along the Rio Grande. A long growing season made possible by the strong New Mexico sun made for ideal conditions, and the wine trade flourished until 1920, when vineyards succumbed to root rot and alkaline deposits caused by the Rio Grande's frequent flooding.

Wine production's rebirth took root in 1978, when experienced vintners from as far away as France and Italy began to buy up prime land and lend their expertise to the growing and winemaking processes. As quality improved, the industry took hold; today some 44 wineries craft award-winning cabernet sauvignon, chardonnay, merlot, sauvignon blanc, pinot noir, and riesling, among other varieties, from Taos to Las Cruces. Sparkling wine produced by transplanted members of the Gruet family, renowned in France for their champagne, has become increasingly popular.

It's well known among chefs and wine connoisseurs that local foods taste best with locally produced wines; growing from the same soil, the plants take on the flavors of the earth to form a subtle but discernible complement that deepens their connection to one another. As more and more chefs avail themselves of locally sourced ingredients, New Mexico's ever-improving wines are getting another look from wine aficionados who once dismissed them.

True oenophiles embrace good wine regardless of provenance, of course, and local connoisseurs are savvy enough about their choices to keep chefs and sommeliers on their toes, always in search of the next great find or the perfect vintage to complement that season's menu. Given the range of cuisine here, there's room for everything from fine French burgundys to a light Italian prosecco to a Spanish rioja and the subtle fruitiness of locally produced pinot noir. Chile-spiced dishes pair particularly well with fruity wines, which bring out the slightly sweet undertones of the chile—chile is a fruit, after all. Up-and-coming vintages from South America, Portugal, Australia, and South Africa are showing up on high-end wine lists along with the usual French and Californian favorites, expanding our



*Chile has been the heart of New Mexico cuisine for centuries. From top chefs to home cooks, it's still made much in the same way today, only food processors and blenders have replaced the mortar and pestle.*

opportunities to broaden our palates and embrace the distinctions among them. Wine here has become a true passion, as evidenced by the increasing number of collectors and wine clubs, and a number of restaurants are adding wine bars and shops to their offerings. It all comes back to the food, of course; without the impetus of excellent chefs providing wine-worthy food, the passion would have withered on the vine.

Responding to the burgeoning wine culture and abundance of local farms, ranches, and dairies contributing fresh, organic produce and meats, chefs here—some of them transplants from the world's great restaurants, others home-grown—find Northern New Mexico, with its appealing mix of sophistication and lack of pretension, an ideal place to expand their repertoires while incorporating traditional foods and getting close to the earth that nurtures them. Let the world's other culinary capitals contend with fleeting fads and attitude—here we'll savor the work of talented chefs grounded in local lore and ingredients, preparing their dishes with loving attention to detail. And we'll always give thanks for the Three Sisters, who started it all. ✱

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