



REFLECTING ORANGE COUNTY'S FINER LIFESTYLE | JULY 2009

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# FLAVOR FUSION

Sante Fe, New Mexico's destination charms – art, jewelry and adobe architecture – now include a rich array of culinary influences.

Next year marks Santa Fe's 400th anniversary, with an attendant flurry of activities. The capital of New Mexico is known for: Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings of sun-bleached bones and oversized flowers; mile-long picturesque Canyon Road, with its 100-plus art galleries; the Sangre de Cristo Mountains; hanging braids and circles of edible *ristras*, or fiery-red dried chili peppers; Navajo sterling silver jewelry at the portal of the Palace of the Governors, where American Indian artisans sit on blankets and sell their handmade wares; handmade cowboy boots made of ostrich, python or crocodile skin; sumptuous polychromatic sunsets; D.H. Lawrence's little-known oil paintings of frolicking nudes housed in the venerable La Fonda hotel; the Romanesque St. Francis Cathedral, with its literary reference in Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*; the Museum of International Folk Art; the open-air Santa Fe Opera; skies that go on forever.

But right up there with O'Keeffe, turquoise jewelry and 300-year-old adobe homes the color of Sedona soil, are the myriad of restaurants featuring Southwest cuisine, a definition which, as I discovered, is changing dramatically. Food in Santa Fe is a primary part of this city's identity. Whether your choice is a local barbecue house, Tex-Mex, more traditional regional Mexican cooking, or more adventurous five-star restaurants, there are multiple choices to suit every taste.

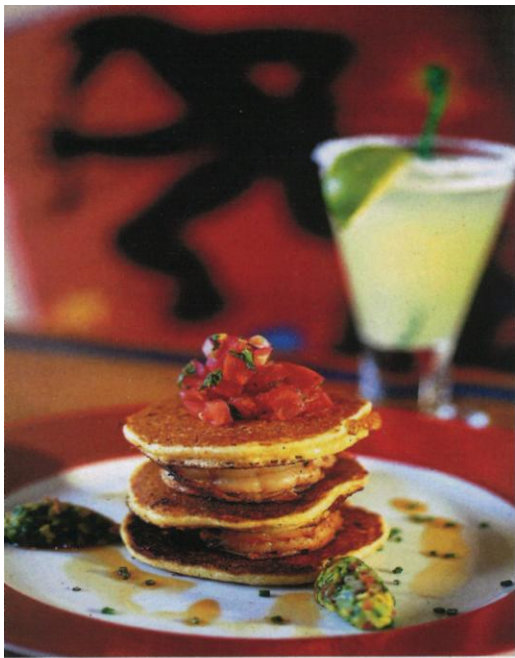
Since the mid-1980s, when famed Berkeley chef Mark Miller

launched his inspired Coyote Cafe, Santa Fe's restaurant scene has evolved far beyond the indigenous trinity of corn, beans and chilies. True, in order to appreciate it, you need not be aware of the confluence of multiple intersecting cultures, foods and flavors that today comprise the underpinning of Santa Fe's sensational and sophisticated cuisine, with its complex array of pungent and piquant seasonings and creative combinations. But a brief foray into history highlights the rich fusion of pre-Hispanic culinary influences, notably those of indigenous Indian tribes, along with the Colonial Spanish and early-Mexican contributions.

In the 16th century, from the Old World to colonized Mexico, the Spaniards brought pork, lamb, beef, wheat bread and rice,

ABOVE Terra's patio at Encantado Resort; BELOW The dining room at Terra





BOB FILA/THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER ARCHIVES

**Grilled corn cakes with chipotle shrimp from the Coyote Cafe**



**Geronimo entrance**

cheese and butter, garlic and onions, cilantro and cumin, sugar and limes – where they integrated Aztec cultivated crops: corn, chilies, beans, avocados, tomatoes, and chocolate. Following the 1,500-mile-long Camino Real (Royal Road) from Mexico City to what is now The Plaza in Santa Fe, they traded

foodstuffs with the indigenous pueblo tribes – the Hopi, Navajo, Pueblo, and Pima, who tended corn, pinto beans, squash, pumpkin, and gathered Piñons.

This tripartite of food traditions created what we readily identify as conventional New Mexican or Southwest cooking: chili verde, black beans, sopapillas, posole, nopales, and empanadas. Miller invented “modern” Southwestern cuisine, and, recently, innovative chefs have added yet a new influence: Pan Asian.

I spent four days in Santa Fe visiting friends. We gorged ourselves on the delights of some of the city’s most well known establishments, both the renowned and expensive (Coyote Café, Geronimo) and the economical (The Shed). We also tried a recently opened restaurant, Terra, which is associated with the luxurious Encantado, an Auberge Resort. We struck gold at every meal. We also hit the Saturday morning farmer’s market, situated in the trendy Railroad District.

Having interned at Chez Panisse with the red-haired and bearded Mark Miller, long before he moved to Santa Fe and I opened my own restaurant in Berkeley, I eagerly dined at the Coyote Café shortly after its launch. Miller’s Southwestern menu was indeed modern – and sensational. Fast forward to 2007 when Miller sold the restaurant to Eric Distefano – former chef at Geronimo – and his partners, who dramatically changed the menu.

But Coyote is still jumping with satisfied patrons and loud pop music. After perusing the cocktail menu, I understood why. Not only are the drinks inventive, judging from the five I sampled, in addition to my own, these elixirs combine a wry flair with technical perfection. Only problem: how to choose? Descriptions of the drinks read like haiku poems – Capri Martini: aromatic fresh basil muddled with fresh lime juice shaken with premium vodka and presented with a balsamic reduction and a cherry tomato mozzarella flower; and Belle Paire: poached pears blended with brown sugar and strained and shaken with a boutique pear brandy from Oregon and highlighted with a cloud of vanilla foam.

I finally settled on the mythic Persephone: pomegranate martini with a hint of cinnamon. Each sip brought me a little closer to the Greek character, who was both queen of Hades and the goddess of spring. Of the swigs from my friends’ drinks, my favorites were Norteño Margarita: hatch green chile

infused tequila shaken with fresh lime juice and Cointreau accented with a green chili salt on the rim; and Lavender Martini: premium vodka shaken with lavender syrup and Meyer lemon juice kissed with a lavender honey rim. You can’t go wrong with pre-dinner or late-night cocktails at Coyote.

Although New Mexico is land-locked, seafood choices were plentiful: Puget Sound Dungeness crab tortellini, lobster bisque, Ahi tuna tartare, himachi, scallops, salmon, and sea bass. Chef Distefano has added a distinctly Asian accent to his menu, steering it away from my preferred regional focus established by Miller. Alongside roasted poblano peppers, grilled pumpkin squash and chili lime pepitas, we found Vietnamese chutney, yuzu marmalade, tempura asparagus, and wasabi mashed potatoes.

I started with Mexican white shrimp short stack, wild shrimp on griddled corncakes with chipotle butter, guacamole and tomato relish (a dish I vaguely recall from Coyote’s early days). The succulent shrimp blended perfectly with the crispy corncakes and piquant smoky chipotle. Trying to stay with Santa Fe flavors, for my entrée, I chose the buttermilk pan-fried, New Mexican organic “pollo real” chicken, comprised of leg confit, sweet potato flan, grilled pumpkin squash, Port wine macerated Bing cherries, and au jus. Again, the combination of foods nearly danced on my tongue. Although more Asian fusion than traditional Southwestern, the food is delicious in this boisterous play den.

The following night we dined at the elegant Geronimo, located in the 250-year-old Padre Gallegos House on Canyon Road. Each of the four intimate dining rooms with white-washed walls, hardwood floors, beamed ceilings, and familiar refrains from 1940s big bands, offers a slightly different feel. In one room, there was a comforting kiva fireplace below an altar-like arrangement of impressive moose antlers and flowers; and in another, ox blood-colored burnished leather-backed chairs and banquettes.

Coyote’s Distefano has recently returned as owner/executive chef to his old stomping ground of 12 years – yes, Geronimo – replacing Chef Martin Rios. Given that info, I reviewed the menus on their Web site. As one might expect, only one item remains from last fall’s offerings: peppery elk tenderloin and applewood smoked bacon, with roasted garlic, fork-mashed Yukon gold potatoes, sugar snap peas, and creamy bran-

died mushroom sauce. Distefano has imported his Asian theme to Geronimo as well, though he calls the food “global eclectic.” What first strikes me while perusing the menu is the distance from which he’s recruiting his raw ingredients: Maine lobster; Hawaiian swordfish, tuna and pineapple; Hudson Valley foie gras; Maryland blue crab; Mexican white prawns; and New Zealand olive oil. During a time when increasing numbers of chefs are thinking “local,” Distefano appears to be doing quite the opposite.

Not having tried the new dishes, I can only judge from the menu, which sounds appealing, especially for lovers of Pan Pacific ingredients. Desserts, too, look intriguing. I could definitely go for the trio of crême brûlées: Venezuelan chocolate, brown sugar, and Grand Marnier. The Web site’s photos of various dishes illustrate exceptionally refined presentations. Indeed, each image resembles a still life, almost too beautiful to dive into with a fork.

Craving some lusty, native Santa Fe dishes, the following afternoon we headed for the 50-year-old landmark, The Shed, in the heart of downtown. Inside the 17th-century adobe building, the walls of this windowless dining room are lavender-hued with murals of lush, meandering flower gardens. Here, we loaded up on their specialty: simple

cheese enchiladas. Two fresh blue corn tortillas slapped on a plate, sandwiched with a mixture of cheddar and jack cheese, swimming in a subtly spicy red chili sauce. Since I was first introduced to this wildly delicious creation more than a decade ago, I never make enchiladas any other way. But, since I have yet to duplicate the sauce in my own kitchen, I faithfully cart home a half-dozen jars, sold at the front counter.

On my final night, we settled on Encantado Resort’s Terra, a few miles outside the city. Dining on the glass-enclosed *portale*, or patio, which faces east to the Jemez Mountains, a flaming sunset reflected vibrantly in our wine glasses. Executive Chef Charles Dale’s menu maintains a connection to regional influences – indeed, many of his organic ingredients are sourced locally. My starter proved the evening’s highlight: confit of suckling pig, with a soufflé pancake and chipotle hoisin (there’s that Asian-influence again). A generous slice of crunchy, melt-in-your-mouth roasted skin accompanied the moist, fork-tender pork; the hot twist on sweet hoisin proved the perfect complement. And don’t miss the exceptional truffled pommes frites, possibly the world’s best French fries.

For farmer’s market enthusiasts, check out Saturday’s fanfare in the newly opened Railyard District, home to many art galleries

and artists’ studios. (Traveling with your dog? Volunteers provide a free dog-sitting service at the market entrance.) Santa Fe residents and restaurateurs are committed to supporting an established network of Northern New Mexico’s organic farmers. Harvest time in late summer and early fall offers a gorgeous cornucopia of fruits and vegetables, especially green chilies. Just follow the piquant aroma. Grab a plate of warm, roasted chilies, their skins blackened. Pop one in your mouth and savor the essence of 400 years of Santa Fe flavors.

### Where to Eat

**Coyote Café**, 132 W. Water St.; (505) 983-1615; coyotecafe.com

**Geronimo**, 724 Canyon Rd.; (505) 982-1500; geronimorestaurant.com

**The Shed**, 113 1/2 E. Palace Ave.; (505) 982-9030; sfshed.com

**Terra**, 198 State Rd. 592; (877) 262-4666; encantadoresort.com

**Santa Fe Farmers Market**, Railyard District; santafefarmersmarket.com

### Where to Stay

**Encantado, an Auberge Resort** 198 State Road 592.; located in Tesuque, just 10 minutes from Santa Fe’s Historic Plaza. Call (877) 262-4666 or log onto encantadoresort.com.

### Sangre De Cristo Mountains

