

Flavors of the North

Tucked away in some unlikely places, several rustic but sophisticated eateries celebrate New Mexico's bounty

There are good restaurants to be found in the rural reaches of Northern New Mexico, but you have to know where to go. Ranging in atmosphere from casual to elegant, a handful of places stand out because of the quality of the dining experience and the passion of their chef-owners, all of whom share a reverence for garden-fresh herbs and vegetables and a desire to nurture their guests with simple but satisfying fare.

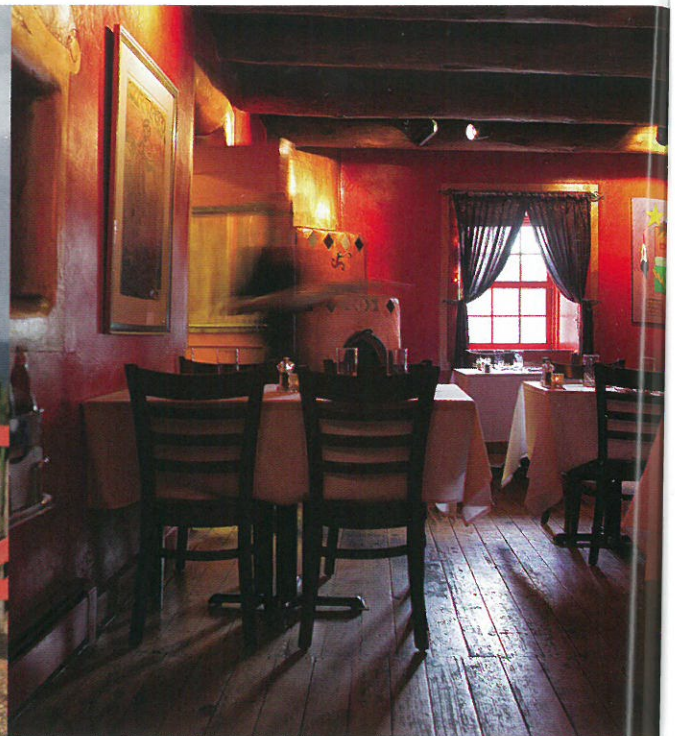
El Meze "Fred's back!" The happy news spread through Taos quickly in 2008 when Fred Muller, who had garnered an avid following in the '90s with his fondly remembered Fred's Place, returned to town after an eight-year absence. In the intervening years, Muller pursued a variety of vocations. He first ran away to Maui to chill out, then went to nursing school and served as an EMT, and ended up working with the US military to train soldiers in counterinsurgency during the Iraq war. Between gigs he traveled a lot, from the Middle East to Southeast Asia, until his passion for cooking was reignited and he was ready to give Taos another go.

A native North Carolinian who was raised primarily in Europe, Muller's world travels, along with his training as a chef in Switzerland, inspired him to see local food as a unique repository of history and culture. "To understand regional cooking you have to understand the history of a place," says Muller, who also considers himself a culinary historian. "American cooking is our heritage, and I wanted to create a place to preserve, or bring back, that heritage."

At his restaurant, El Meze, about two miles north of Taos Plaza, Muller does just that. Billing the fare as "*la comida de las sierras*," or food of the mountains, he prepares simple but sophisticated dishes from fresh, organic, local ingredients like trout, corn, chile, and wild mushrooms. One of his signature dishes, *trucha yerbabuena*, was inspired by a hiking trip in the Gila Wilderness, where he noticed wild mint and watercress growing near a trout-filled stream. "I realized I had the makings



Fred Muller of El Meze



of a meal right there," he says. His menu now features a stepped-up version of that meal: grilled whole trout seasoned with preserved lemon, mint, cilantro, and garlic, accompanied by a watercress and shaved fennel salad.

While many of Muller's dishes showcase his contemporary take on hyper-local favorites like posole (his version simmers for three full days) and heirloom bolita beans, he also draws on New Mexico's Spanish-Moorish legacy for Mediterranean-style small plates like *jamón serrano*, the famous Spanish cured ham, served

with white nectarines, shaved Manchego cheese, olive oil, and cracked black pepper, or fried green olives stuffed with Spanish blue cheese. His herbed fried potatoes are dusted with thyme and lavender and served with horseradish aioli. The desserts, created by dessert chef and general manager Annette Kratka (Muller's wife and business partner), include a lavender crème brûlée and mini cardamom donuts, while the wine list features offerings from Spain, Italy, France, and Germany.

The restaurant's physical setting is as special as the food. The cozy adobe

dining areas are part of the historic El Torreón Hacienda, built in 1847 as a fort to safeguard the residents from Comanche and Apache raiding parties. The patio offers a stunning view of Taos Mountain, a perfect reminder of the strong sense of place that informs this uniquely satisfying cuisine. 575-751-3337, elmeze.com

Clockwise from top left: Fred Muller and Annette Kratka in the restaurant's garden; El Meze's cozy interior; fresh trout on the plate and on the grill.

