

El Meze: Flavors of Portugal, Spain and New Mexico

In writing these weekly articles our goal is for you to get to know the people behind the doors of Taos and what makes them tick ... and to give you a sense of what it takes to be innovative and entrepreneurial today. Our gift to you is sharing the stories of people who work hard for their livings and try to contribute to the community at the same time. As always, we ask that you contact us if you know someone you think would be a match. From both of us, may you be blessed with the happiest of holidays!

Given their dedication to and the scope of their new enterprise, consisting of El Meze, the restaurant, and the KORE gallery, Fred Mueller (of prior Fred's Place fame) and Annette Kratka spend most of their time there.

As Mueller, chef, says, "With all the hours we spend here, we'd never see each other otherwise."

Ah, the life of the entrepreneur.

Mueller and Kratka met when Kratka came out from California to help her sister and brother-in-law (Lesley and Peter Fay) in their then-new restaurant, Graham's Grill. "I ran the front of the house and I learned a lot. After a while I knew it was time for me to go, to start something new. It's ironic, because Fred was working there too, but there

Mono Chico LLC, DBA's El Meze Restaurant & KORE Gallery

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was a no-dating policy. When we both left I asked him how serious he was about opening a restaurant together ... we've been together ever since."

Kratka is the owner/manager of their establishment in the old El Torn Hacienda in El Prado, a rustic space that takes you back to times of old. Mueller is the chef extraordinaire — and historian — who regaled me with fascinating facts about the Moorish, Spanish, North African, Indian and New Mexican historical contributions and the "exciting and exotic flavors historically imbedded in the culture of Northern New Mexico" (per their menu).

Many people dream about having their own bookstore-slash-café or gallery-slash-boutique, but the right combination is not always easy to achieve. In this case, the renovated Hacienda's ambiance is a distinct and definite selling point. This is especially impor-

INNOVATORS & ENTREPRENEURS



**HEIDI CONNOLLY AND
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tant now, when "what worked 15 years ago doesn't work now," Kratka says. "The town of Taos has changed. Some of the struggle has been to figure that out. You can't base your decisions on what the town was, but on what it is."

Kratka focused on finding the right approach. Those who have eaten at El Meze already know how richly diverse and unusual the food is, and how the artwork (from partner J Fine Art) enhances the dining experience. Bill Davis Photography in one corner highlights timeless Southwestern elements and J Fine Art the more contemporary, bringing together, Kratka feels, a perfect juxtaposition of the old and the new.

"This goes along with the El Meze theme of putting a modern twist on the old ways. With food, we take the essence of spices, etc., add flavors of Portugal, Spain and New

Mexico ... it all comes together in a unique delicious way."

"I make a pumpkin and chickpea soup, for example," Mueller adds, "and my elderly neighbor told me, 'I haven't had that dish since I was a little boy.' I loved hearing that."

"If you want incredible food, you have to know what you're doing," states Kratka. "Fred is full of more facts than anyone else I know! For me, I don't really care, I just want to know if it tastes good." On the other hand, Mueller is fully trained in the culinary arts. "I actually grew up in Europe and then North Carolina," he says. "But I trained in Switzerland. People don't know that about me, but it's true."

Kratka spent years in the corporate art world and finds that all her experience applies here as well. "There's the same type of creativity and flexibility. Art is very personal-and so is food. You have to be able to work with that in mind."

Many admit to finding the general Taos work ethic challenging, but Kratka has found her approach works wonders.

"I treat people the way I want to be treated ... At my restaurant I say, hey, this is what we're doing, this is why, and this is what I want from you, what we expect. Fred and I agree: We treat people like people, not a commodity or asset. That's probably why we have less turnover."

"I also knew we couldn't

wait for everyone to come to us. We sent out PR packages here and to Santa Fe and to food magazines to introduce ourselves, get people to hear the name. You can't wait for people to come knocking down your door."

Still, although profitability is increasing, it's not all fun and games financially. Kratka still works long hours elsewhere and currently takes no salary from El Meze. Of course she hopes — and expects — this will change soon.

Mueller and Kratka's love for Taos and New Mexico contributes to their staying power.

"What I love about Taos is the sense of community," Mueller says. "Here there's what I call a 'super community' ... I missed that when I left."

And their belief that competition is good for the local economy helps as well. "It's not about the competition — it's about bringing more people to Taos, says Mueller, "and making it an attractive place for everyone."

Heidi Connolly and Christopher Madrid write exclusively to create awareness of the critical role entrepreneurship plays in our community. To learn about the many services available to businesses and start-ups or to make suggestions, contact the Taos Chamber of Commerce at (575) 751-8800.