

**El Meze - Moor Flavor**  
**Tania Casselle**

I'm sitting on the patio of the new El Meze restaurant in an historic hacienda under Taos Mountain. It's sunset, the atmosphere is as mellow as my glass of Rioja. Waiters glide past carrying bowls of fried green olives stuffed with Spanish blue cheese, and steaming sopa verde piled high with mussels.

Then chef Frederick Muller swings out of the kitchen, looking matador sharp in his black chef coat, and shares a few words with each table. All I can say is: Welcome back Fred. It was worth waiting seven years for this.



When Fred closed his old Taos restaurant, Fred's Place, back in 2000, locals mourned not only the loss of his cooking - his green chile is still praised by many as the best in town - but the whole legend of Fred's Place. The crowd was artsy, the scene raucous, and the infamous Fred's Girls wait staff - all legs, sass, and spice - were as feisty as the food. Whether you were seated in heaven or hell, beneath the ceiling mural that blazed The Rapture over one half of the room, Satan over the other, you knew you were in for a divinely wicked time. When Fred wasn't blasting 300 meals out of the kitchen a night, he was off on the mesa shooting old TVs as target practice. Then Fred left town and everyone resigned themselves: another vestige of the wild Wild West had bit the dust.

Nobody, including Fred, knew that seven years later he'd be back to open El Meze in the El Torreon Hacienda. It's a totally fresh approach - fine dining Taos-style, with a menu that he describes as a modern interpretation of Moorish Spain.

“Our cuisine is old world Spain inspired with northern African influences.” While researching his 1995 book La Comida, The Foods, Cooking and Traditions of The Upper Rio Grande, Fred found many North African influences in food and culture.

“The words adobe, acequia, horno? Those are all Arabic in origin. They even say the Matachinas dance as performed by the Pueblos was brought from the Moors. The Moors occupied Spain for 800 years, and when Coronado was tromping through the wilds of New Mexico he brought a lot of Moorish people with him. Those influences came here

very early.” He gestures around the dining room's thick adobe walls, within the enclosed compound that was originally designed as a fort. “This whole hacienda could be in Afghanistan or North Africa.”

Fred sees his new direction less as a culinary shift, more a culmination of his 30 year career. Trained in classical French cuisine in Switzerland, he worked with Mark Miller, Jeremiah Tower, and Joyce Goldstein in 1980s San Francisco.

“It was an exciting time, but I got disenchanted with the food. It was so experimental and I really wanted to get into regional American cooking.”

He returned to his roots in North Carolina, exploring the South's culinary heritage at Bill Neal's Crook's Corner in Chapel Hill. The influence lingers at El Meze, in mess o' greens, and duck confit with collard greens. “I'm from the South! Collards originally come from Africa.”

Now all his influences have come full circle.

“Old world Spain, North Africa, the South, New Mexico, there's a common thread between it all. It's about reinventing and finding passion again in your art. I was burned out on Fred's Place. I said I'd never cook again. Where was the fun, the passion, the artistry of doing something new?”

His answer came in a “light bulb moment” vision of El Meze - the food, the mood, even the colonial compound setting. “Then I became very passionate.” He spent 18 months developing original dishes based around cumin, smoked Spanish paprika, and ground New Mexico red chile. (He points out that harissa, a spicy North African condiment, is basically the same as chile caribe.) Other core seasonings are mint, cilantro, lemon – including preserved lemons he prepares himself – plus lavender, coriander, fennel bulb, cinnamon and cardamom (mini cardamom doughnuts anyone?). His chile is Chimayo Red, which he insists is the best in the world.

“I'm a very rustic cook, I like things that are slow simmered and stewed and I like a bone sticking out of it. I like rich brothy things.” He uses only vegetable stocks at El Meze, even in his signature grilled double cut lamb chops with cracked black pepper and lavender and fried garlic chips. “I'm not serving a traditional lamb demi-glace, I'm serving a vegetable jus, which gives real richness and sweetness to the sauce.”

Another popular entree is pan seared halibut on a broth with sweet potatoes, fennel, andouille sausage, and chunks of orange complete with rind.

“I'd want to eat like this in Spain, in a little place where they have an open firepit, a suckling pig roasting over it. I serve the food I like to eat.”

Small plates (far more substantial than the prices suggest) include Kefta, the only traditional middle eastern dish on the menu because Fred says it's hard to find in New Mexico. The spice infused lamb kebab is refreshed with cucumber yogurt and cilantro dipping sauces.

"For me, simpler is better," says Fred. "Make this flavor simple, straightforward, but the best that it can be. You want to taste cilantro? Here's cilantro. I want every bite to burst with flavor."

The results are punchy and clean. Gazpacho topped with blood orange granita simply glows out of the bowl, and it has every right to be pleased with itself, it's the sparkiest gazpacho I've ever tasted. Herb frites with thyme and lavender are so fragrant I barely touch the accompanying aioli - it threatens to swamp them.

The sole indigenous New Mexico dish, buffalo short ribs adovada, marinated in red chile, arrives swimming in juices, so tender it sighs from the bone. It's Fred's tribute to the ciboleros – famous buffalo hunters who hunted on horseback with lances and bows and arrows.

"They're cool," says Fred, the reformed TV-shooter. "Hunt buffalo with lances? That's crazy."

General Manager Annette Kratka, the first face you'll see front of house, guides diners through her all-Spanish wine list, and the less familiar dishes, like the winter menu's calabacas y garbanzos, a hearty soup of butternut squash and chickpeas, with a smoked ham hock.

"Scare the people to death!" Jokes Annette, recalling last winter. "People from the south ate it like you wouldn't believe. Everybody else would look at it and say what is that? What's a ham hock?"

She also creates the deserts, including those cardamom doughnuts, and a lavender crème brûlée. The filo leaves of my lemon mousse and raspberry napoleons crackle with pistachios, cardamom, and coriander.

Response, according to Fred, has been "Incredible. People are astounded by the flavors." Santa Fe concierges send diners their way. Nevertheless, some former Fred's Place customers didn't understand the menu. "They only heard Fred's back, but I've moved on. Nobody's doing this anywhere in the country probably. Why would they? This is the only place you could do it." He emphasizes that El Meze is not strictly Spanish - he doesn't serve paella. There are Moroccan elements, but it's not Moroccan.

“We're Moorish. Even people who've lived here for generations don't understand - Moorish is here. It's part of the culture that's been embedded in Northern New Mexico for a long time.”

And he's sticking to his vision. His only concession since opening in January is to add more small plates, for variety and value.

Inside the 1847 hacienda, two cozy dining rooms feature art by Thom Wheeler and Bill Rane, and Fred will use the 4000 square foot space for entertainment and performance art including flamenco and belly dancing. Plans also include a wine tapas bar. “A relaxed, groovy lounge with couches.”

He also has a slight hankering to place a burning car outside the restaurant, or rather an artistic installation flamed up with propane, to act a signpost to El Meze. “Turn left at the burning car!”

“No, No, No,” Annette shakes her head. It's hard to tell if he's teasing her or not.

Fred no longer wants to cook for 300 people a night. An intimate 60 or 70 covers keeps the tone personal and the quality high for his more sophisticated menu.

But on a July evening on that patio, it's impossible not to feel part of one big and very satisfied family, even if the party is now more sedate, the table hopping more restrained. As the folk on the next table leave, they genially inquire “Did you have a delicious a meal as we did? The combination of flavors!” This is their fourth visit, and they'll be back.

“Our philosophy when we opened this place was that it would be consistent and stellar every single night,” says Annette. So even though menus are updated a couple of times a month, the chef is always the same - Fred is in the kitchen six evenings a week (four in winter).

Reservations recommended.

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