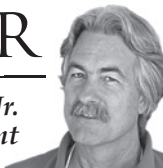


by Jerry Camarillo Dunn, Jr.
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"The Curious Traveler" received the 2011 gold medal for Best Travel Column from the Society of American Travel Writers, in a competition organized by the group's western chapter. For Jerry's latest book, see www.myfavoriteplacematgeo.com.

Eating Small in Santa Fe

Little Discoveries in Craft Food and Drink

Santa Fe is filled with people who came from somewhere else. They fall in love with the adobe architecture, the people of the Southwest, the luminous beauty of the sky – and they decide to stay on.

"Now what?" they wonder, settling back to Earth. "How in the world am I going to make a living here?"

Some get into the food business, but not in the typical green-chile style of Santa Fe. Instead they pick a niche product, something they love, and they hover over that one item like proud parents over a baby, tenderly helping it develop.

On a recent visit, I met a bunch of these folks and tried their offerings. As at a great dinner party where the guests all sample bites from everyone else's plates, these special tastes have to be passed along:

Kakawa

A purveyor of chocolate both edible and drinkable, Kakawa was founded by a "chocolate anthropologist" after researching the cacao elixirs developed in Mesoamerica in pre-Columbian times. (Spanish conqueror Cortez drank chocolate with Aztec ruler Montezuma, a social event Montezuma no doubt later regretted.) Powerful, dark Mesoamerican drinking chocolates are intensely spiced and complex, unlike the smoothed-out concoctions that later became popular in Europe and North America and that Kakawa also serves.

"Sometimes guys come in here like they're walking into a bar," says owner **Tony Bennett**. "They say, 'Gimme the chili chocolate, the hottest stuff you've got!' They drink a few sips, their eyes water, and they sputter, 'I'll have the American one.'"

To avoid the fate of these hot-chocolate macho men, customers can first sample different chocolates in tiny paper cups, then order what they like.

The owner's favorite blend is two-thirds American, one-third Mesoamerican chili chocolate. "Doing anything tonight?" Bennett asked as he poured my cup. I said no, is there something going on? Then I understood: I'd soon be pleasantly amped up on cacao. Prudently, I drank just half a cup, enjoying the subtle flavors, and took the rest home. Mixing it into coffee the next morning created mocha with a spicy southwestern snap.



Before and after: Santa Fe Spirits' unaged white whiskey and resulting "Whiskeyrita"

Santa Fe Spirits

"I was either an unemployed or unemployable architect," says Englishman **Colin Keegan**, looking back a few years to when residential building took a nosedive with the economy. So Colin reinvented himself, like so many people who move to Santa Fe. Silver-haired and humorous, he lives just north of town in Tesuque, where his orchards produced so many apples he didn't know what to do with them all. He made cider, but one year ended up with 500 extra gallons. "So I made hard cider," he recalls. "Then I had 500 extra gallons of hard cider on my hands." He acquired a small still and made apple brandy – then realized, "Oh s***, I've become a moonshiner!"

Colin got a distiller's license, bought an industrial building, and turned a hobby into a business. At Santa Fe Spirits, I took the distillery tour, admiring a 250-gallon still whose copper tank and old-fashioned fittings belonged in a Jules Verne story. A nearby room was filled with oak aging barrels and the pungent aroma of spirits.

We adjourned to a small bar to sample Colin's product line, which ranges from apple brandy to single malt whiskey. Marketing manager **Adam Vincent** stood behind the counter and set out what looked like a holder for votive candles but was filled with a line of shot glasses. First up was Expedition Vodka. I tossed mine back. "Whoa!" I said, "that tastes like gin!" Colin looked at the array of glasses and realized he had set it down backward. I'd started at the wrong end. "Well," said Adam with a laugh, "it was right from *this* side!"

I'd really liked my Wheeler's

Western Dry Gin, made with locally picked juniper and cholla cactus, but couldn't quite describe its distinctive scent. "It should smell like New Mexico after a rainstorm," said Colin, "at least that's our goal. There isn't another gin like it on the planet."

His genuine pride came shining through. "Other artisans I know around town have taken weird routes similar to mine," he mused, "somehow ending up in Santa Fe and making a product they love."

Santa Fe Honey



Jars capture the sunny spirit of the Santa Fe Honey Salon

Driving around Santa Fe one day, I saw a yellow house on a corner with a sign outside saying "Santa Fe Honey Salon and Farm Shop. Free Samples."

Mmm. I love honey.

I was greeted by a nice young guy who had dark hair peeking from under a knit cap and the sweetly intoxicated expression of someone in love. It turned out, he's in love with honey. A metal rack of jars stood in the front window, some light, some dark, all glowing in the morning sunlight.

"I like for people to taste honeys back to back," he said, introducing himself as **Gadiel**. "Let's start with the mountain gambrel oak, a very rare honey. The bees produce it from tree sap, not flower nectar. It can take us seven years to come across it."

Gadiel held out a flat, wooden coffee stir dipped in the honey. I popped it in my mouth – and the world began to melt. The honey tasted like cinnamon and sunshine. (Hmm, not a bad name for a '60s rock group.) Next, I tried mountain wildflower honey. "There's a bit of juniper and clover in there. It's great for allergy relief." Then came desert wildflower. "For this we go to the Rio Grande Valley next to the river," Gadiel explained. "There's a different set of flowers – you have salt cedar, sage, and tamarisk – so the honey tastes different."

I left the shop with a jar from Gadiel's special stash: cat's claw mesquite honey, an unusual creamy white. "Like all our honey, it's pure, raw, and unfiltered," he said. "All the goodness is still in there."

Gadiel spends part of his time gath-

ering honey in the fields and at the family farm near Socorro. His wife and baby mind the store. "It's a way of living for us," he said. "I'm in the middle of this sweetness, with my hands full. And that's what we want to share."

I left the shop feeling that Gadiel's disposition is as pure and sweet as his honey.

Others



Chocolate toffee creation at Whoo's Donut's

Whoo's Donuts: I got addicted to this small bakery's cake donut with white-chocolate lemon frosting studded with salty pistachios. They also make a maple bacon model with dark-chocolate glaze and chili brown sugar. Tip: Monday is "Dollar Donut Day" at the shop. Whoo's donuts are also available at the Santa Fe Farmers Market on Saturdays and at other outlets around town.

Barrio Brinery: This tiny shop makes pickled products fermented in brine instead of vinegar, which brings extra probiotic benefits. Try the snappy kosher pickles and the fermented escabeche, a blend of jalapenos, carrots, onions, and spices. To wash them down, order Mexican Coca-Cola made with cane sugar rather than high-fructose corn syrup.

Handcrafted Food and Drink

Kakawa:
1050 E. Paseo de Peralta,
(505) 982-0388,
www.kakawachocolates.com

Santa Fe Spirits: Distillery:
7505 Mallard Way, (505) 467-8892.
Downtown tasting room:
308 Read St., (505) 780-5906.
Web: www.santafespirits.com

Santa Fe Honey Salon:
St. Francis Dr. at Paseo de Peralta,
(505) 780-8797,
www.santafehoney.com

Whoo's Donuts:
851-B Cerrillos Rd.,
(505) 629-1678,
www.whoosdonuts.com

Barrio Brinery:
1413-B West Alameda St.,
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www.barriobrinery.com