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TARA'S ORGANIC ICE CREAM EDIBLES IN THE FLOWER GARDEN

THE FRESQUEZ FAMILY OF MONTE VISTA FARM ESPANOLA, NEW MEXICO

BY PATRICIA KLINDIENST



Dave, Loretta, and Brenda Fresquez

“We’ve been in this valley since the 17th century,” David Fresquez says as we sit with Loretta, his wife, and their daughter, Jennifer, in the living room of the house he built with his own hands in Española.

“Everything was farming here,” David explains. “Once when I was hunting I found letters from the early 1800s in a little cabin in the north here, and I read them. They were always talking about the land—the weather and the land, that was it. It was always the land. Always, always the land.” His voice slows as he repeats the word always, emphasizing the bond between the old Hispanic families and the land in Española Valley.

“We were raised to be close to the land,” Loretta adds quietly. Her roots in this valley reach back to the 1700s through her father, Salomon Jaramillo, and her mother, Maria Espinoza. She grew up surrounded by a beautiful orchard and ate from her family’s extensive garden.

I met the Fresquez family at the Santa Fe Farmers Market one Saturday morning, as they stood under a white tent with a sign that read *monte vista organic farm* behind them. A chef in a starched white tunic had gotten there before me, and he was deep in conversation, laughing and talking as he chose what to cook that day from their display of beautiful vegetables and fruit—baskets of potatoes—red, gold, blue, white and purple; firm heads of red-

striped garlic; gorgeous, fat tomatoes—red, yellow and orange—plus red and green chilies, and neat bunches of deep greens herbs. Arranged near these were bags of crisp greens, bowls of strawberries, plates of sliced melon, and bouquets of brilliantly colored dahlias. On one acre of land—essentially their backyard—the Fresquezes produce an astounding array of delicious, organic foods, herbs and flowers, harvesting tons of produce from land they load with as much as it will bear, keeping it fertile without using any chemicals or wasting any water.

Every Saturday and Tuesday, the Fresquez family makes the drive down from Española, a small town situated in the green expanse of valley between the Sangre de Cristo Mountains to the east and the Jemez range to the west, home to many of the old Hispanic families. It’s a rural community and fairly homogenous, in contrast with the moneyed and often rootless mix of people in Santa Fe. The market has the power to connect these communities, which are separated by the wide gulf between those who grow food and those who buy it. And as David, Loretta and Jennifer’s stories will teach me, growing food also has the power to restore and renew an ethnic heritage nearly lost to the pressure to assimilate to Anglo culture.

“I wouldn’t have dared to take tortillas to school,” Loretta says when I ask about their experience as the first generation of their families to attend public schools, where being punished for speaking

Spanish taught children to be ashamed of their native culture. “We were so ashamed to let other people know we were eating tortillas. Oh, God! You can’t let anybody know that.” She took sandwiches made with white bread instead.

“White bread was exotic,” Jennifer says, laughing.

At home, real food came from the land and they raised it themselves. Food is their favorite topic—the bridge that carries them over a river of loss.

“My mom’s family garden,” Jennifer remembers, “was such a magical place. All the cousins feel the same way. We all remember my grandfather with his straw hat.

“They had apples, cherries, pears, peaches, apricots. The trees were all concentrated around the ditch. That particular ditch was deep, people used to drown in it.” The ditch—an acequia—was centuries old. “I remember my grandfather irrigating from that ditch. It was on a hill and the garden was lower, so the water would flow down into it. My grandfather would be directing the water where he needed it. You only have a certain amount of time. There are gates all over the property.”

She pauses, radiant, then adds, “It’s funny, because you don’t realize that’s not how people get water everywhere in the world. The relationship we have with water is very important to us. Irrigating from the ditches means people have to share. Everyone’s responsible.”

“Whenever I think about New Mexico,” Jennifer says with emotion, “it’s one of the things that’s always been there and will always be there, the ditches. It’s what makes us, us. That, and having my grandparents, and running wild in the orchards—I think

I was very lucky to grow up with all of that. And here, at my parents’ place, being part of growing food from start to finish, harvesting something I planted, I think, ‘This came from me.’ That’s really a beautiful feeling. It’s sad that mainstream Americans are losing that—or have lost it,” she says, pausing. Then she adds, “Or never had it at all.”

“We love food,” Jennifer says. “Not just traditional foods, but all food. When we went to Europe last year, it was great, because we got to try all this different food. We got to talk to a lot of people. People there really appreciated that, as Americans, we were so interested in tasting food that was foreign to us.

“One thing I really loved about Europe is that they understand what food is—it’s central to their culture. They eat in big groups, multigenerational groups. It’ll be 10 o’clock on a Tuesday night! That’s how food should be—it should be part of your relationships with people, especially your family. It goes on for a long time. People go out in the evenings. They stroll. There’s movement,” Jennifer says with emphasis. “That’s when people in America are home watching TV Americans are very lonely,” she adds quietly.

“You know, people have a natural affinity to come together over food,” Jennifer says. “But the way we live our lives now is going away from that. America has no food culture. The farmers markets are filling that void. I think the market in Santa Fe has done an exceptional job.”

“Every week, you meet new people,” David agrees. “People from all over the world. You form relationships.”

“And experimenting with new foods,” Jennifer says. “We’ve tried a lot of different things. This year we’re growing 12 different kinds of potatoes. American consumers, they know red potato, russet potato—that’s their whole knowledge of potatoes. So part of it is educating people, talking to people about the things that we grow.”

“And then we’ve met so many restaurant owners and chefs,” Loretta says, “and they like our produce. So the more they like it, the more ideas we get about foods and what to grow and how to grow them. And on and on it goes.”

“You learn so much,” David says.

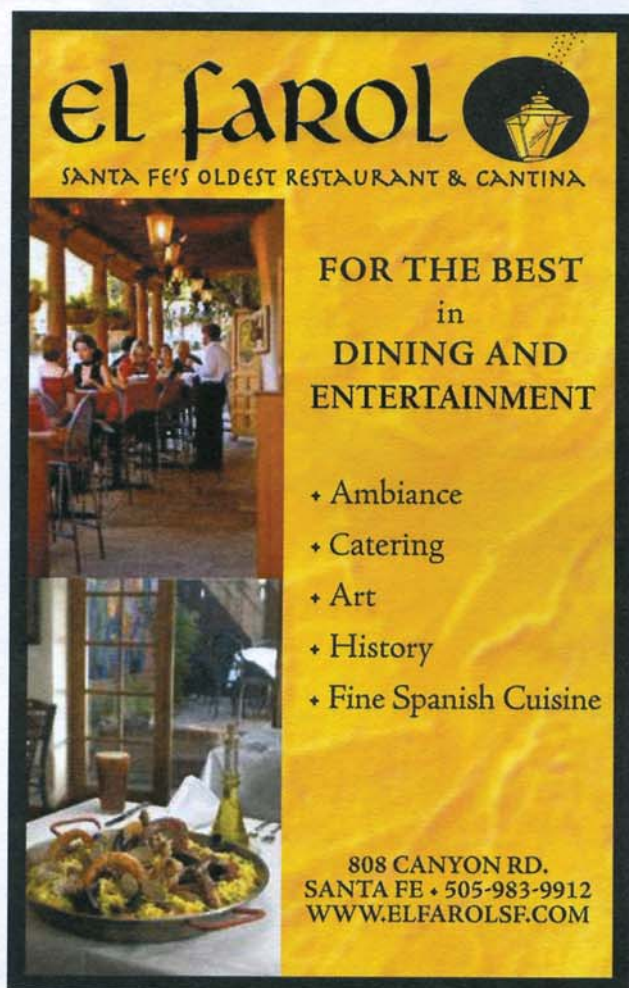
At the market, the Fresquezes have become teachers. Young Anglos, new farmers committed to growing everything organically, are eager students. They’re hungry to learn and respectful of David and Loretta’s experience.


Monte Vista Farm represents both a leap forward—a new international impulse, as David, Loretta and Jennifer reach out to the world beyond their valley and beyond the borders of the United States, to embrace a vast world of good food—and homage to their heritage, a way to reclaim a connection to their native land.

“When I’m out here,” David says, “just working the land, I’m so happy, so content. Just being here. Especially in the morning. When you’re out here just working the soil and putting seed in the ground and picking up the harvest, you know, you feel like you could live forever ...” □

Patricia Klindienst is a University of Connecticut certified Master Gardener and an award-winning scholar and teacher. She is the author of “The Earth Knows my Name: Food, Culture and Sustainability in the Gardens of Ethnic Americans” published by Beacon Press. She lives in Guilford, Connecticut and teaches creative writing each summer at Yale.

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