

SANTA FE | ALBUQUERQUE | TAOS

APRIL
2019

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LOCAL FLAVOR'S

Homestead

ISSUE

local flavor

A TASTE OF LIFE IN NEW MEXICO

The beneficiaries of the 1862 Homestead Act must have been a bold bunch. Yes, the government granted them up to 160 acres of Western-ho land, but in exchange for keeping it and the opportunity to buy it, these hardscrabble folks had to tame it and make it produce. As we order boxed cereal to arrive at our door with the click of a mouse, we may struggle to fathom living even a smidgeon of this lifestyle.

For 15-some years at Local Flavor, we've featured hardcore 21st-century homesteaders, who've devoted their lives to extreme self-sufficiency. We've learned a lot, including the fact that those who homestead just a smidgeon are also pretty hearty. In fact, we feel any amount of homesteading is noble in the effort to live independently and believe in one's own industriousness. In response to our call for stories from those composting, hunting, foraging, gardening, farming, sewing their own clothes, and beekeeping a smidgeon, we received a full crop of responses. Thank you all. We celebrate your self-reliance as you inspire us toward a more do-it-yourself lifestyle.

For consultant and teacher **Rachel Hillier** of Corrales' Little Dirt Farms, self-reliance starts with the soil. And it's about soil on the mend with her latest project at the two-and-a-half-acre Heritage Field on the Albuquerque Museum's Casa San Ysidro property. "Soil restoration is essential to sustainability," she says.

Appropriately, her "Introduction to Homesteading"

curriculum begins on

April 27 with a class titled Soil

Prep and Pest Management and ends in October with Soil Restoration and Cover Crops. The 11-class hands-on program will help participants understand the ecological restoration in process on Heritage Field, the time necessary to grow local organic food, and the ancestral methods of farming and sustainability used by Spanish and Native peoples. Rachel will also introduce the idea of teamwork as a homesteading concept, which might seem anathema to the sovereign. "Determine your area of strength, and collaborate," she insists.

Another super soil advocate is Santa Fean **Sam McCarthy**, who shares, "When I was a kid my mother would say she wished to be buried in a compost heap. Now I raise red worms and teach people how to use them to develop fertile soil through composting." Twenty years ago, red worms invited themselves into Sam's backyard compost pile. He now sells generations of these red wrigglers under the name Do It With Worms at the Santa Fe Farmers' Market, where he also talks with the full spectrum of individuals—enthusiast to grossed-out naysayer—to help them become composters of their household scraps and yard waste with "the least labor and the least water." He says, "Composting in your backyard takes the burden off the local landfill, and leads to long-term carbon sequestration. Healthy soil leads to healthy gardens, which lead to healthy people."

story by **CULLEN CURTISS**

A SMIDGEON OF Homesteading

Two of many healthy Do It With Worms customers are **Melissa Homann**, a retired chef, and her husband **Joe Munley**, who've gardened everywhere they've ever lived—window boxes in a five-flight walk-up on Manhattan's East 4th Street, an alfalfa field in Pojoaque, a backyard rental in Brooklyn. When they moved to Albuquerque, the first thing they bought was a composting bin. Due to their particularly stubborn patch of ground, they've also introduced fertilizing chicken poop pellets and calcium to the soil to help the roots absorb nutrients; as well, they sprinkle diatomaceous earth around the cement block walls, "because Albuquerque has a serious cockroach problem." In the fall, they plant a cover crop of rye or red clover. Melissa and Joe have taken advantage of Albuquerque's gardening, composting and water classes, learning, among other things, to aerate the city's water before applying it

to their plants, to employ vertical piping with holes to guide water into the soil roots, and to mulch with straw bale. Melissa says, "I bucket all the water I use for washing vegetables back into watering the garden. Lots of hauling!" To which she also enthusiastically adds, "Shop for your produce out back! Last year, the leeks were amazing. Carrots and radishes the year before. It's always a surprise."

Santa Fean **Andrea Balter**, a retired Los Angeles police officer, shares the same joy, but for her 19 girls. "I am enchanted with my hens," she says. Andrea has several breeds, including Columbian Wyandotte's,

Production Reds and Araucana. And these beauties yield pink, blue and several shades of brown eggs, which she'll sell if she cannot eat. She uses the hens' nitrogen-rich droppings in her compost piles, which in turn help grow her veggies. "It's a wonderful feeling to have a sense of self-sufficiency, and raise chickens in a way that is healthy and happy," Andrea says. "Factory farming is so brutal, that if one does some research, one might never buy another egg!"



Rachel Hillier of Little Dirt Farms

Albuquerque Museum



from Sam McCarthy



Joe Munley

Melissa Homann

Andrea Balter



Andrea Balter



My life now revolves around helping others regain an innate, yet often dormant, knowledge of food production.”

Sam McCarthy, *Do It With Worms*

The theme of excitement continues on a large scale with Farm & Landscape Manager **Wes Brittenham** of Los Poblanos Historic Inn & Organic Farm, whose team is in constant conversation on 25 acres of ancestral agricultural land. He says, “Our homegrown food travels less than 300 yards from the field to your fork!” Wes describes blooming fruit trees, month-old chicks awaiting new digs, Slovenian beehives, fields primed for planting edible and decorative flowers, as well as nearly 1,000 new lavender plants, garlic coming up, several hoop houses yielding multiple harvests of greens and radishes, and carrots to come. Meanwhile, a variety of seedling trays promise exuberant starts. As for the essential elements of water and earth, Los Poblanos practices conservation, managing flows from the acequia, and treats its soil with cover crops, manure and compost, which Wes calls “homegrown,” lovingly mixed and layered with offerings from the kitchen, the landscapes and plant materials—using the strength of a tractor. Wes writes, “We are so excited to be a source

of local, organic and fresh food to share with our guests, visitors, the community and each other.”

While the “strength of a tractor” is not always necessary, “non-stop hard work, experimentation, education and lots of trial and error” are. **Philip Rothwell** and **Nazca Warren** of Alegria Farmstead bought their half-acre land in Ribera in 2010. “It was completely over-run with weeds and trash, and the house needed renovating. We created earthworks, water catchment systems, fixed drainages and pathways, carved rows in the field and double-dug beds. With water harvesting and permaculture, the land is healing and our harvests are abundant,” they write. Their micro-farm, which includes some fowl, is mainly subsistence, but they sell some harvest at the Tri-County Farmers’ Market and the Eldorado Farmers’ Market. All grown from organic heirloom seeds, their crops include lettuce mix, kale, chard, arugula, walking onions, sunflower sprouts,



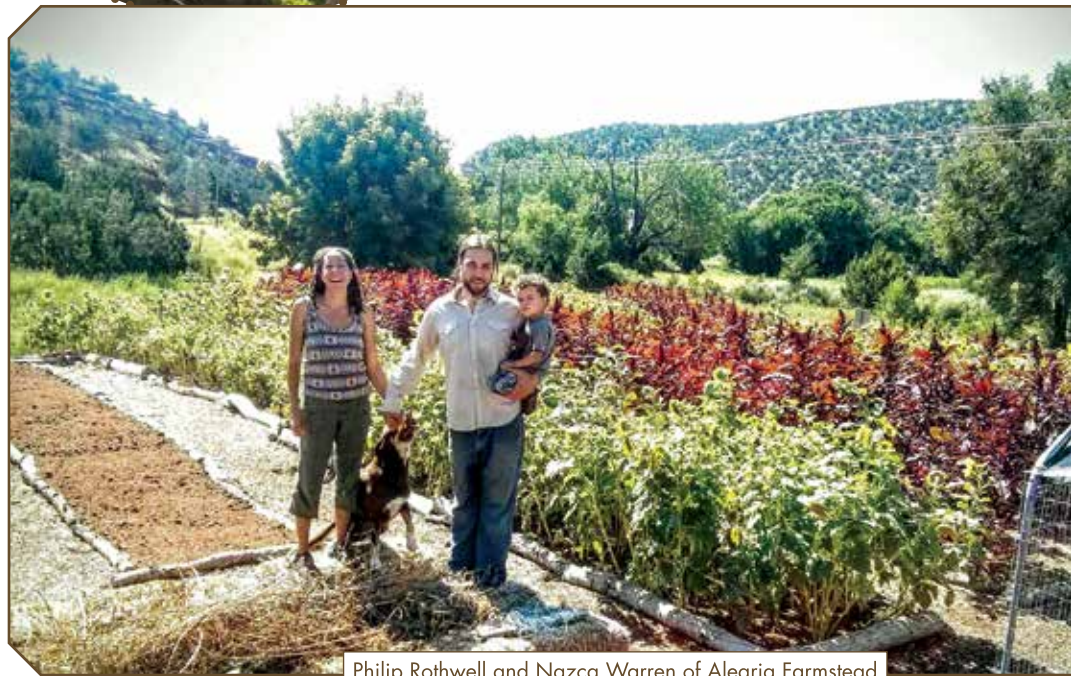
Wes Brittenham



Lead produce farmer Judy at Los Poblanos Historic Inn & Organic Farm



Melissa Homann



Philip Rothwell and Nazca Warren of Alegria Farmstead



Philip Rothwell

A SMIDGEON OF Homesteading



Resa Sawyer of the Middle Aged Spread at Aspenwind Farm



Nan Fischer

Nan Fischer

tomatoes, green beans, herbs, corn, amaranth, carrots and radishes. They also wildcraft seasonal edible plants and medicinal herbs to make remedies. Nazca writes, "It's humbling to grow in Northern New Mexico," but she indicates that's just a part of the overall journey.

For **Resa Sawyer** of the Middle Aged Spread at Aspenwind Farm on Taos Pueblo the journey has been decades-long, homesteading in various locales and living off-grid, growing food and medicine, saving seed, raising honeybees, dairy goats, chickens and guinea hens, and using her farm products to create goat milk and honey soaps, shampoo, herbal salves and lotion bars. In 2017, she moved to 20 acres on Taos Pueblo, where she built barns, erected fencing, planted fruit trees, shrubs, and perennial herbs and flowers, not only for product ingredients, but to provide nectar and pollen for a burgeoning apiary. Resa also serves on the board of the Pueblo's Red Willow Farm, a nonprofit community farm and educational center. "Our priorities are not to just make use of water and land, but to reinvigorate the skills of self-reliance," she writes. "In an age when Romaine lettuce can kill you and there is no security in our current economy, the true benefits of a homesteading life can't be quantified."

Also in Taos is **Nan Fischer**, who founded Taos Seed Exchange, a free community service for home gardeners to share their seed. Through the organization, Nan has become a bit of a guru in the community, teaching people how to grow their own food, put it up, and save seed. She also sells nursery starts. "My garden is mostly things I can store, freeze or can—zucchini, dry beans, beets, carrots, green beans, garlic, soup peas, snow peas," she says. "I have a greenhouse and use row covers and frost

In an age when Romaine lettuce can kill you and there is no security in our current economy, the true benefits of a homesteading life can't be quantified."

Resa Sawyer, Middle Aged Spread at Aspenwind Farm



Resa Sawyer



Nan Fischer of Taos Seed Exchange

Anna Martinez



Nathalie Bonnard-Grenet, and Chef Xavier Grenet



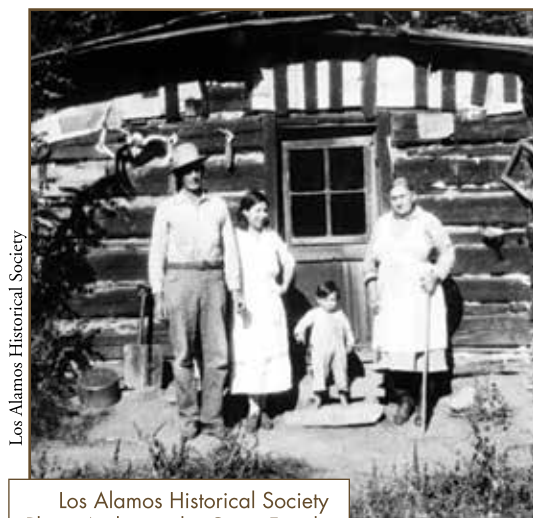
cloth to extend the season. You can't get the flavor or quality of homegrown food out of season. It's cheaper, tastier and more nutritious than buying. And it's exhilarating and rewarding to eat your own broccoli or squash in January! It makes the hard work so worth it!"

Same goes for **Nathalie Bonnard-Grenet**, owner with her husband **Chef Xavier Grenet** of Restaurant L'Olivier in Santa Fe. In addition to the restaurant, she manages up to seven beehives. "They are magical because of what they produce—honey, propolis,

pollen, wax," she says. Nathalie describes the restaurant's location on the tree-lined river as a great spot for one hive. Contrary to popular belief, honey-making bees such as hers are "nice," so guests on their patio are completely safe. Just last year, Nathalie harvested 170 pounds of honey, using it in restaurant dishes like Honey Ice Cream, Briouat Dessert, Honey-Glazed Pork Chop and Honey-Glazed Roasted Squash.

Her hope is to inspire others to try beekeeping and help bees survive. "They are the main pollinators for our trees and flowers," she says.

While the aforementioned have chosen to create some independence from modern convenience and are generally thrilled by the hard work and grateful for the rewards, they are aware they are standing on the aching backs of those who came before. On display in the form of artifacts, photographs and biographical profiles, through the summer at Los Alamos' Municipal Building is the *Women of the Homesteading Era* exhibition. Imagine the Pajarito Plateau between 1887 and 1942 (when the Manhattan Project arrived), where 30 Hispano families and six Anglo families homesteaded and dry farmed. The exhibit highlights the lives of three women, fighting bad weather, insects and other threats. After your perusal, you might pick up a Los Alamos Homestead Tour brochure, which will guide you to sites of homesteads around town, in and amongst gas stations, clothing, hardware and grocery stores, and convenience marts—evidence that we've progressed so far that we want to go back, even if just a smidgeon.



Los Alamos Historical Society

Los Alamos Historical Society Photo Archives, the Grant Family

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