

# local flavor

A TASTE OF LIFE  
IN NEW MEXICO



*Santacafe*  
REDUX

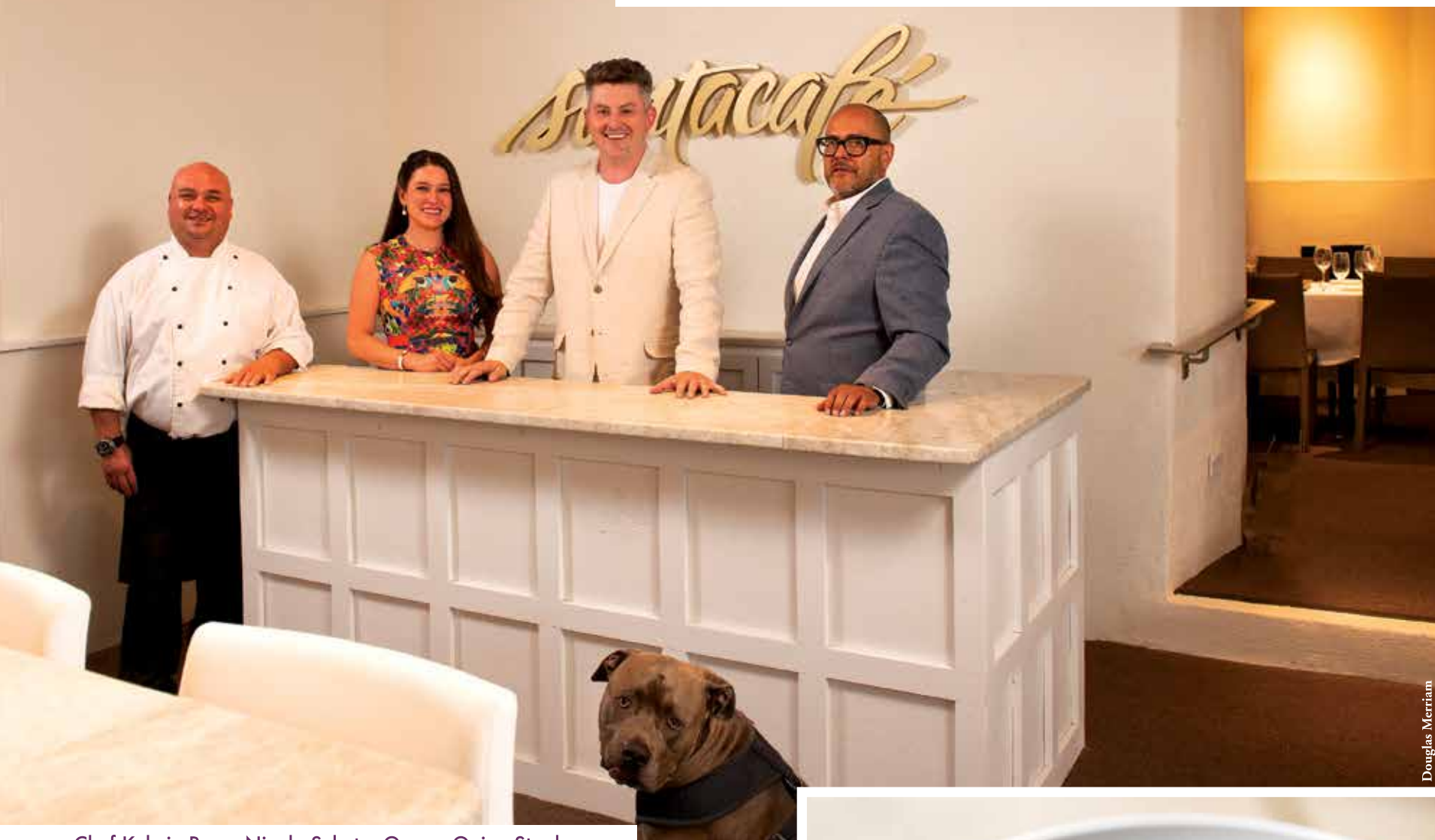
AUGUST 2019    SANTA FE | ALBUQUERQUE | TAOS



# SantaCAFÉ

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Chef Kelmin Rosa, Nicole Schutz, Owner Quinn Stephenson, Manager Paul Montoya and Bodyguard Spartacus

*Poco a poco*, some say, but Quinn Stephenson has adopted and lives the term *kaizen*, Japanese for incremental change (*kai*) for the better (*zen*). What could be better for Pojoaque-born-and-bred Quinn, three-year owner of the recently renovated Coyote Cafe?

Now, also owning the venerable 35-year-old santacafé, a beloved staple in the realm of local fine dining. "This is a once-in-a-career opportunity! Iconic restaurants like Coyote Cafe and santacafé only come available every couple of decades, if that, so it was a strategic move to make an offer when I did. I feel humbled and honored to inherit santacafé as a brand. I know the work that came before me and the countless sacrifices others have made. My mission is to be the best steward I can be, as well as consider *kaizen* philosophy every day," Quinn says.

As I speak with Quinn in the shade of an old apricot tree that flourishes (perhaps in part due to his family's Champagne toast and prayers) in the newly landscaped courtyard of the historic 160-year-old Padre Gallegos House, I get the sense that all of his moves have led methodically and strategically to this moment of owning two top fine-dining establishments in Santa Fe.

Ramsay de Give



Maple Leaf Farms Duck Breast



"I'd like to think one would not talk about the city's best spots without considering either," Quinn says. I ask him if he feels like a restaurateur now. "It's a natural progression for someone who loves this industry to grow," he demurs. "I am definitely stepping into a new role. What you would call it, I don't know, because at the end of the day, I will still buss a table, shake a signature cocktail, suggest a Premier Cru Burgundy and take the trash out."

You name the role and Quinn is proud to say he's held it at one restaurant or another since he was 15: dishwasher, busser, food runner, barback, bartender, sommelier, mixologist, manager, partner. "As a local, you start working in restaurants as a summer job. My first was at a concession stand at the Flea Market washing dishes. After that, El Nido, Pranzo, Geronimo, Coyote, a few places in Albuquerque, Radish & Rye...."

He'd run out of fingers if he listed all of them. "I've never worked or made a dollar outside of the restaurant industry."

Midway through his third year at the University of New Mexico studying business, Quinn was honest with himself about what he really wanted to do. "I remember the class I walked out of. It was Philosophy. It was one those logic formulas—A plus B equals D minus...—I'm outta here. I remember the classroom, where I parked my car. But I do think everyone should take a business class, because you can apply [the principles] to everything."

Perhaps the right recipe of blackboard, books and long, busy nights inside the adobe walls of some fine restaurants led to his confidence to become sole owner of Coyote Café when his friend and partner Chef Eric DiStefano died unexpectedly. "I said I need to pool all of my resources to get the shares at Coyote. I had been there since I was 19; I loved Coyote. It was my baby. It was what I believed in." At the time, Quinn was a minority partner in Geronimo, Radish & Rye, and Coyote Cafe. "Those guys understood what I was trying to accomplish. Chris Harvey had Geronimo. Camille and Dru got Radish & Rye. It was perfect. All really beautiful, actually."

Still, what was at the core of Quinn's passion for running restaurants? "I genuinely love visiting and enjoying restaurants in my personal life. Eating and drinking is so personal at times, and then you add great company, food and service in a beautiful establishment," he says. "It brings me joy and inspiration. I then try to facilitate that feeling for our guests because I know what a pleasure it is to experience it first-hand."

The day we talk in the courtyard, which seats 100 (the interior seats 75), on chairs, lightly fringed with drywall dust, we're gently interrupted by a stream of inquisitive folks—a representative for the landlord's family and a roofer who hint at a tour of the renovation; a Sotheby's realtor, who occupies an office space off the courtyard and jokes about wanting Quinn to move the pop-up Champagne and oyster bar in front of his office window; his mother Valerie, whose immediate warmth is confirmed by a genuine hug when we part; and



**"We don't light fire under staff,  
we light fires inside them."**

Quinn Stephenson





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Ramsay de Givé



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The Violet Hour Martini

Quinn's fiancé Nicole Schutz, whom Quinn said I needed to meet to truly understand everything that the restaurant would become.

"Nicole is a huge inspiration. It's been fun to do this together," Quinn says. "Her smile, her laughter, her energy is just so awesome." And indeed, her depth and warmth are very guiding. She confirms their shared love of food and hospitality. "We are super sensitive, emotional people," she says. "We cry over food all the time, the beauty of it, because we understand the creative process, the hard work. We feel on a constant basis so fortunate to have the means to eat whatever we want. It's a luxury." Hunger and animal welfare are two big concerns for the couple, and Nicole hopes to do more benefits like the one they did for the Santa Fe Animal Shelter & Humane Society.

The couple met at Geronimo after Nicole returned home to Santa Fe from Los Angeles, Calif., to take care of her dying grandmother. Together, they're rebirthing santacafé, which is a beautiful collaboration involving many other players. They've enhanced the minimalist approach that former owners Bobby Morean and Judy Ebbinghaus fostered and have incorporated some key grounding pieces from Coyote Café's neighbor gallery Sequoia Santa Fe—a tree-trunk bartop, back-lit onyx wall panels from Mexico, a white granite host stand, and a commanding lychee tree-root wall-hanging from Thailand. These bold accents complement the clean, contemporary beige-cream-white-ivory hues that are clearly a sweeping signature style. In the courtyard, four sets of hand-crafted, gold-painted metal lounge tables and couches extend the bar atmosphere through the open windows; Ella Fitzgerald and that school of music wafts from the new speaker system; lights bedazzle the trees and pattern the flagstone.

Feel the mood yet? Just wait until you interact with the staff and taste the food. Nicole says, "We live by a Maya Angelou quote that we have on our wall of the third floor at Coyote: 'People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.'" She explains: "We are in the business of people. Our philosophy is around creating a family. Everyone should feel happy and generally like showing up to work because it's a professional performance every night. It takes an intuitive person, which is a high form of intelligence, to do this work well. We aim for giving an experience you'll not forget."

Quinn says, "We don't light fire under staff, we light fires inside them. The culture we have created and continue to create is unmatched in my opinion. Every single employee is part of the team for a reason. If I've learned anything, it's that for me to be successful, I have to surround myself with talented individuals. One of the best I've worked with is our general manager, Paul Montoya. I respect him, I trust him emphatically, and his reputation as a sincere professional in this community is outstanding. He was one of the first people I called when putting the deal together."

Another person in whom Quinn has resounding confidence is santacafé Executive Chef Kelmin Rosa, who'll continue his role after having been with the restaurant for eight years. The menu features many classics, and seafood- and vegetable-forward dishes that are driven by





high-quality ingredients, such as a tower built with oysters, crab legs, mussels, shrimp and ceviche; mini lobster rolls; peas and pecorino in a mint shallot vinaigrette and summer corn with chiles, lime and local feta; potatoes with caviar and crème fraîche. Their breads, pastas and vegetable-based sauces are all house-made, and partnerships with local growers mean “quite a bit of the menu will change with the season’s bounty,” Nicole says.

Their aesthetic and flavors are influenced by food-driven travel. “Eating is my favorite thing to do,” Nicole admits freely. Los Angeles, where she spent seven years as a college student and young professional, is an inspiration for its cultural diversity and its “vibrant culinary scene.”

But home is deeply important as well. Quinn shares a story from years ago about a diner who razed him for never living anywhere but New Mexico. “I love my life and I love it here,” he says. “Perfectly happy right where I am.” Quinn recently bought his grandfather’s house when it came up on the market. “We kept it a secret and then invited the whole family to dinner there. You should have seen my dad, walking around shaking his head. He grew up in that house. It’s just all so perfect.” Perfect also refers to the home’s ample square footage inside and out for their blue nose pitbull Spartacus, and to the location, which is within biking distance of both restaurants, which are, in turn, within walking distance of one another across the Plaza.

Though Quinn may not have needed a sign that he was making the right decision by purchasing santacafé, a divine-design coincidence sweetens the story. Before becoming a New Mexico Supreme Court justice, his grandfather, Donnan Stephenson, ran his law firm out of the building that is now santacafé. The room to the right as you walk in the front door was his office.

“The older I get and the more experiences I have, I remind myself to trust it,” Quinn says. “I do put dominos in effect to make things happen.”

*Santacafé is located at 231 Washington Ave. in Santa Fe, 505.984.1788, santacafe.com.*



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