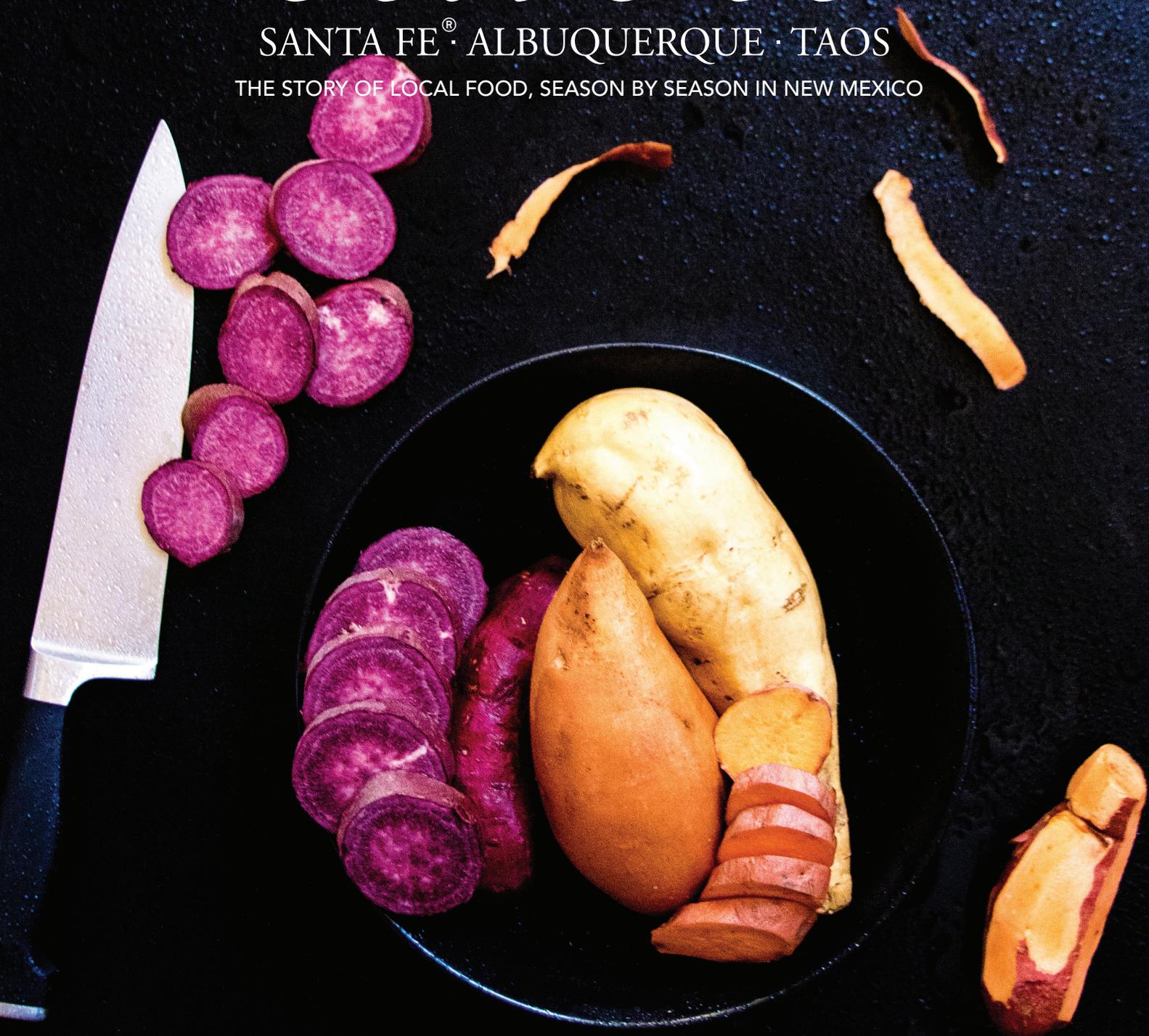


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VEGGIE FOOD FOR THE SOUL

JUST LIKE GRANDMA USED TO MAKE—MINUS THE MEAT

By Sophie Putka · Photos by Stephanie Cameron



Left: Shawn Weed. Top right: "Chicken" & Waffle with sage-thyme breaded cauliflower and bourbon maple syrup. Bottom right: Wedge salad with grilled iceberg, smoked tomato, radish, hardboiled egg, and blue cheese buttermilk dressing.

Give Shawn Weed fifteen hundred square feet and he'll take, well, an acre. At his new comfort-food first, vegetarian-food second restaurant, Chef Weed has transformed a fifty-seat space and a close network of connections into a restaurant that buzzes with warmth and activity. At The Acre, the philosophy behind the scenes is equally focused on community; Weed makes it a point to nurture the people who feed his farm-to-fork Northeast Heights operation.

Sitting across the table from me, Weed's excitement for The Acre is palpable. It's not just that after long years of working in New York fine dining he finally got to open his own restaurant. It's not even the fact that he's back in Albuquerque, where he went to high school, or that he's reinventing the farm-style spreads he used to eat at his grandmother's Midwestern farm in Indiana. No, what The Acre is about at its core is making farm-to-table accessible to everyone and staying true to simple values along the way. "I want to provide really comfort-forward, good food that's not intimidating, that's accessible to people, and that also happens to be seasonal," says Weed. "And let's cut meat out of the equation."

And true to his word, Weed has delivered. The menu is unfussy, carefully designed to tempt even the most vegetable-averse. On first glance, one might not even notice the lack of meat. There are stand-ins aplenty, like the popular Buffalo Cauliflower, prepared to resemble classic wings, complete with blue cheese sauce and celery sticks. There's the Cheeseburger, a hearty beet and black bean patty served with cheddar and avocado, and a Meat(less) Loaf, made with portabella and chickpeas, with rich mashed potatoes and a seasonal vegetable on the side.

Veggies in disguise aren't the only options, though. A pasta with butternut squash, piñon nuts, and a decadent gorgonzola cream sauce steals the show the night I eat at The Acre, and Weed says the wedge salad, starring farm-fresh produce in a take on a fifties classic, has been a breakout hit. He urges me to indulge in a cupful of The Acre's delicate vanilla-lavender ice cream. It exemplifies his "one-in-three" rule: out of every three ingredients in a dish, only one can be unfamiliar to guests. "Nobody's worried about ice cream. And nobody is worried about vanilla," Weed explains. "But lavender? What do you think of right away? Your grandmother? Or perfume?" He made sure the menu headings were totally recognizable—like Pasta or Enchilada—with more detailed descriptions of individual dishes underneath. With plant-based food, striking the balance between challenging guests and putting them at ease has been tricky, but not impossible. The most important thing about local, healthy eating, in Weed's philosophy, is to make it approachable for everyone. He says, "I don't want just vegetarians. I want all people to come, bring their kids, and say, 'It's not all this BS—it's real food. And if we get to skip meat for a day, we're okay with that.'"

Weed isn't actually vegetarian himself ("That's the purple elephant in the room.") and when he decided to open a restaurant, he said he just wanted to make a space where he'd want to take his family. "It just has to feel authentic," he says. "When I'm thinking of good, farm-to-table food, I'm not thinking about the cows. I'm



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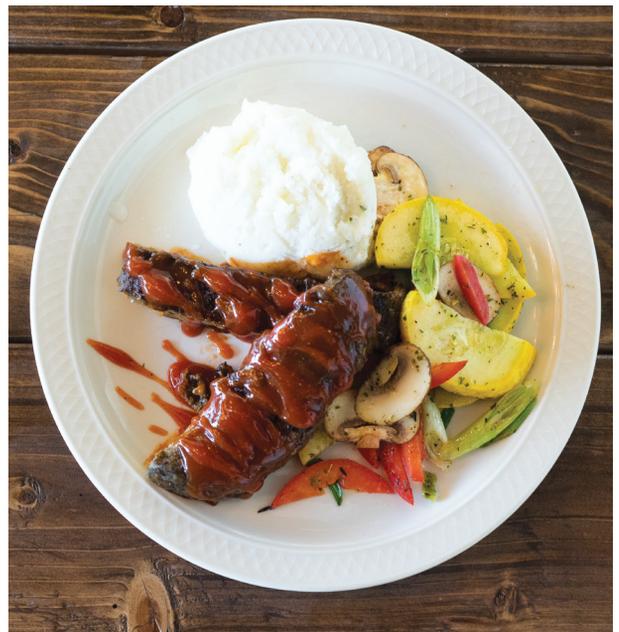
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Left: Ice cream of the day. Top right: Buffalo Cauliflower with red hot sauce and blue cheese. Bottom right: Meat(less) Loaf & Mash with portabella, chickpeas, and BBQ sauce.

thinking about the vegetables. I'm thinking about the wheat fields and the corn, I'm thinking about all of those things and how better to showcase them."

To that end, Weed has focused on building relationships with a number of local farms, including Looseleaf and Sol Harvest, and small artisan food producers like Old Windmill Dairy. Beyond sourcing local, he views himself as a cheerleader, of sorts, for New Mexico-operated makers, featuring a "Daily Catch" every week, which highlights a unique ingredient from a new farm or producer on the specials board. He's had to go out on a limb to pay for high-quality local produce, banking on the fact that almost nothing will go to waste, but it's worth it to him to support local farms. "I have to be busy," he

says. "It's a double-edged sword. You're only going to be busy when the price point is approachable for everyday people. But when I put it at that price point, I can't have stuff go bad. I can't afford to."

In a city with just a few vegetarian-only options, The Acre has been welcomed with open arms. At 3pm on a Sunday, the place is packed with everyone from bearded old men to squealing children. And that's the way Shawn Weed likes it. "I don't want to be the king of vegetarian," he says. "I want more places to open and I want us all to be successful." 🍴

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