



HATCH. The Next Generation

An Austrian immigrant turned Hatch into a chile capital in the 20th century. In the 21st, his great-great-grandson takes it high-tech.

BY *DEBORAH BUSEMEYER*

NEW MEXICO TOURISM DEPARTMENT

It's July 2003, evening. Twelve-year-old Preston Mitchell sits in front of the blue Dell laptop that he carries everywhere. Far from his hometown of Hatch, on a father-son fishing trip in Montana, the naturally inquisitive kid Googles "Hatch green chile" to see what the Web has to say about the pepper that made his village famous. He isn't impressed. The websites are clunky to navigate and offer overpriced chile. He thinks about his grandparents, Judy and Bob Berridge, who work hard hauling chile from Berridge Farms in Hatch Valley to bands of loyal customers in northern New Mexico.

Maybe there's a way to reach more people, he thinks. With that, Preston sees an opportunity. Over the next two evenings, he maps out an Internet sales plan that would require a modest \$300 investment. Then he calls his grandpa. "Papo," he says, "I want to help you. I have an idea."

Five minutes later, he hangs up and gets to work. Just a few days later he launches the Berridge Farms website. To him, it's a chance to dive further into his beloved world of technology and to help his grandparents grow their business. He has no idea that selling their green chile online will mark a turning point in his life. And he doesn't realize—at least not yet—that his idea emulates the philosophy and gumption of the first commercial chile farmer in Hatch Valley, his great-great-grandfather Joseph Franzoy.

When Joseph and Celestina Franzoy settled in Hatch Valley in 1917, small farms grew cotton and wheat. Thigh-high grass covered the land between cottonwood trees. After 12 years in America, the young Austrian immigrants had finally achieved their dream of owning a farm. They had clung to that dream as Celestina bore babies and Joseph toiled in mines, and as World War I spurred anti-immigrant hostilities. That first summer in tiny Salem, New Mexico, the site of their homestead, they lived in a tent with seven children and then built a small adobe home with dirt floors as their family grew even larger. Marshes and thick brush claimed much of their 60 acres. When they cleared it out, Joseph scolded his sons for being lazy. The boys had used horses to pull stumps out of the ground—he did it with his hands.

Neighbors laughed when the foreigner, determined to diversify his crops, planted vegetables in this place

where cotton was king. Area farmers sold the crop to local gins, which shipped it elsewhere. Throughout the region, nobody transported or sold produce by themselves. Joseph saw an opportunity: He would take his crops to the buyers.

"It's incredible to think they had the right idea so long ago and were doing the same thing we're doing now," Preston says. "Agriculture in general is making this movement toward farm-to-table and transparency—knowing where your food comes from. That movement is really bolstering the business model he had a long time ago."

The Franzoy's door-to-door market trips were 16 hours long and it was hazardous to maneuver a wagonload of grains and vegetables over dirt roads winding around foothills. As their farm expanded, they shipped produce on a train to Fort Bayard, near Silver City. That required loading a wagon in the afternoon, then leaving the next morning at 3 a.m. to meet the 8 a.m. train in Hatch.

Joseph's biggest innovation was yet to come—and it almost didn't. The Franzoy's first experience with green chile is today the stuff of family legend. They thought they were being poisoned when they tasted the hot pepper their neighbors clearly adored. But Joseph grew to love it and saved the seed to add to his farming repertoire. At the time, families in the area ate green and red chile, but they didn't cultivate, transport, and market it to anyone outside the valley—until Joseph did.

The distinction of becoming the first commercial chile farmer in Hatch Valley wasn't noted at the time. Green chile wouldn't capture the palates of many Americans for another 50 years or so. But Joseph effectively set the stage for the valley to declare itself the Chile Capital of the World. He bought farms for each of his four daughters and six sons, establishing the roots of a family farming tradition that has sustained them for five generations. His children worked their farms and welcomed 36 babies to the Franzoy family. One of those babies was Preston's "mamo," Judy Berridge, now 69.

Judy has known only farm life in a valley where all farmers know one another, and many are related. She has worked the land side by side with three generations of her family. "It was a wonderful way of life," she says. "Never had any money, but we always ate well."

In junior high she met Bob Berridge, and the couple have been married for 51 years. The two sat in easy chairs next to each other as they reminisced about their farming days. Outside their window, green rows of wheat danced in the spring wind. They

Elaine and Preston Mitchell apply Silicon Valley savvy to Hatch Valley agriculture.



JAY HEMPHILL

still own and rent 300 acres in the valley, but now their son, Bobby Berridge, manages them, as Bob retired seven years ago. Judy's proud of that kind of family unity and the work ethic instilled in the valley's farm kids. She recalls one day when her daughter Barbara Mitchell, Preston's mom, drove her dad's truck home from the field after Bob hurt his back. Barbara was six at the time.

"It's been a good place for kids to get an education—if nothing else, to learn you don't want to grow up and be a farm laborer," Judy says. "It teaches them you work until the job is done. I don't think you get that everywhere."

"IT WAS REALLY HOT, AND WE WERE REALLY EXHAUSTED, BUT ... YOU ALWAYS HAD FAMILY. YOU ALWAYS HAD FOOD ON THE TABLE, AND MOST OF IT WE GREW."

The Berridges' adobe home is near NM 187, a two-lane highway where tractors and pickup trucks lumber north to Truth or Consequences. In summer the canals burst with water, and the fields come to life. Pecan trees soak in irrigated floods, and bright green alfalfa fields call for attention in a sea of earth tones. Bob started planting cotton and cucumbers on land he rented when he was 16. The grain crops, including wheat, hay, and alfalfa, still dominated the region's farms at the time. Cotton, after all, is a cheaper, machine-picked crop. Chile is fussy. It requires precision in its sowing, irrigating, and cultivating. It even has to be handpicked. For centuries, residents all across New Mexico put their culinary spin on chile and elevated it to near sainthood by declaring it the state's official vegetable (although botanists will point out that it's a fruit). But in the years before Americans embraced more exotic cuisines, the produce simply wasn't well known beyond the Southwest. In 1971, that began to change.

That year a group of businessmen, including Franzoy farmers, inaugurated the Hatch Chile Festival as an annual way to promote chile grown in the perfect combination of high altitude, salty earth, and cool nights. Word slowly spread, and attendance grew from 1,500 in the first year to more than 30,000 today. Farmers learned how to package chile into powders for grocery stores, sell it to canneries, and

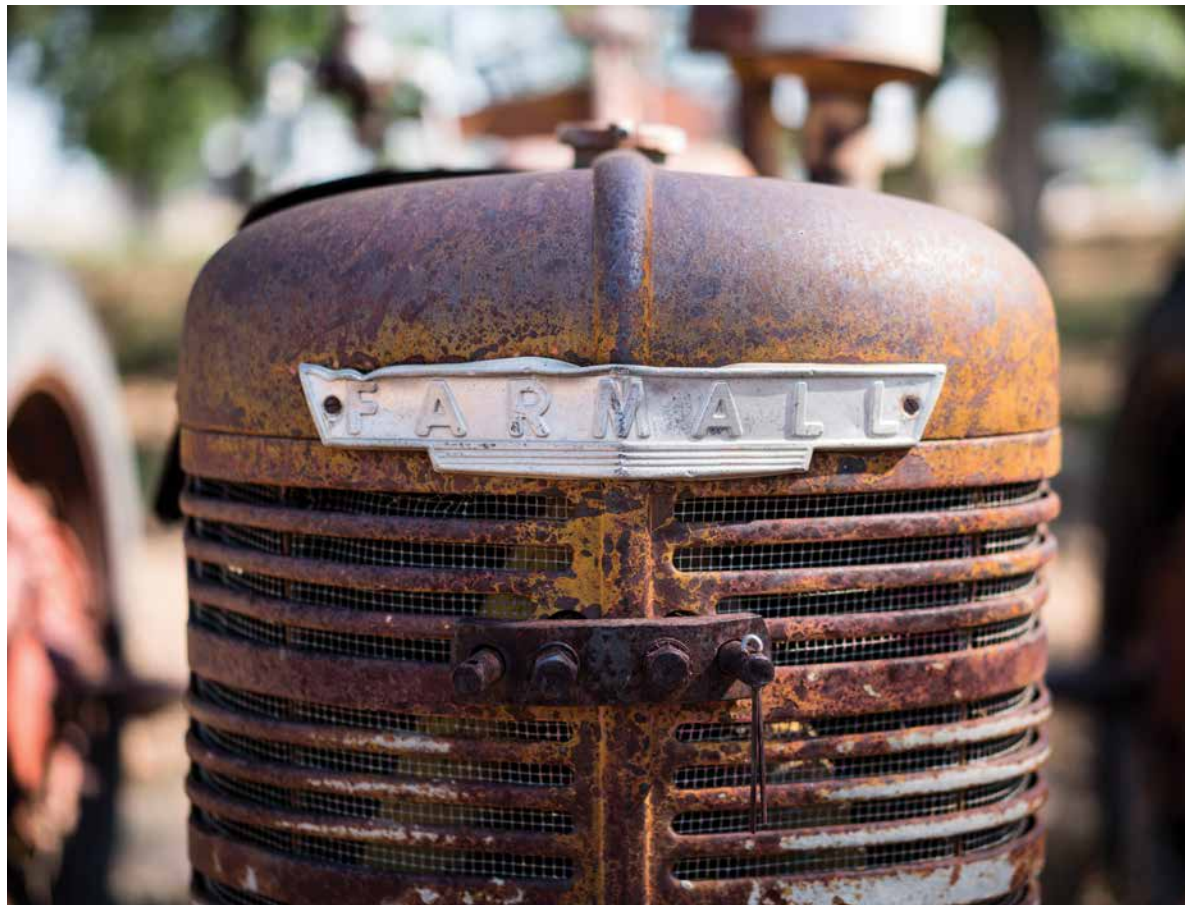
ship semi loads full of the freshest specimens across the country. Over the years, New Mexico State University agronomists helped them create 130 varieties, including the popular Big Jim, named after Preston's great-uncle, and a newer variety called Miss Junie, for Joseph's youngest daughter, who turned 92 in August.

All across the nation, chile took hold of people's tongues and demanded a place on their plates. Southwest-style restaurants cropped up in big cities. Tourists to New Mexico snapped up ruby-red ristras and stuffed frozen pounds of roasted green into their

luggage. Today New Mexico ranks first in the country for chile production, which contributes more than 5,000 jobs and hundreds of millions to the economy. The state duly protects this important crop, recently making it illegal for businesses to falsely claim New Mexico chiles in their products. The Hatch Chile Association has applied for a federal certification mark so consumers know they are buying the real deal from Hatch Valley.

About 1,600 people live in Hatch, where families are connected to the land and to one another. The farms, pecan orchards, and dairies are the village's lifeblood. Less than a minute's drive from Hatch's main street, the land is sectioned into fields that stretch south to the Las Uvas Mountains and east toward the Caballos. The valley is a patchwork of small farming communities like Salem—home to the original Franzoy's—and Garfield, about five miles further north, where the Berridges live.

April is the month to plant chile, and not much has changed about the process since the days when Barbara, 49, worked on her parents' farm. As a child, she woke early and piled into her family's pickup truck with her brother, sister, and cousins when the light was low and the air was cool. The tilled field smelled of moist earth. The younger kids sat behind the tractor and watched chile seeds drop out of



GOING GREEN

The 45th **Hatch Chile Festival**, September 3–4, celebrates the harvest with a parade, carnival, chile-eating contest, music, art, and quaffs from High Desert Brewery in Las Cruces. Sample and buy freshly roasted green chile from area farmers offering a variety of flavors and spice levels. \$10 per car gets you in for the entire weekend. hatchchilefest.com



Matriarch Celestina and patriarch Joseph with seven of their ten children at their Salem homestead, in the summer of 1931. Albert, the oldest son, handles the horse at right.

plastic canisters. Their job: alert the driver if a canister ran out or the seeds fell awry.

About a month later, farmers scraped through the mound of dirt with a pocketknife. If they saw a shoot curled like a tiny white worm, a tractor lightly skimmed off a top layer of dirt so the plant could poke through the earth. When it was their turn to get the water they were allocated by the Elephant Butte Irrigation District Board, the kids and their parents worked all night in shifts, starting pumps and opening gates to deliver the water accurately. “You couldn’t sleep through,” Barbara says. “When you get the water, you’d get a call and you got dressed and you went.”

Green chile is ready to be picked in August, when the flesh is firm and the sun is piercing. The family and a work crew were hunched over most of each harvest day, carefully pulling each pod from its thick stem, starting at the bottom, where the peppers first mature. If the field was dry, a high tractor-trailer drove down the middle collecting gunnysacks stuffed with chiles. If it rained, the harvesters carried their 40-pound sacks a half-mile down the row to a trailer that hauled the produce back to the shed for sorting, tagging, and packing.

“I know it was really hot, and we were really exhausted, but you forget the difficulties,” Barbara says. “I remember having clod fights with my cousins and swimming in the canal to cool off. You always had family. You always had lots of food on the table, and most of it we grew.”

A generation later, along came Preston. As soon as he could walk, he rode with his papo on the tractor. He watched everything grownups did, trailing behind them, asking “why” over and over. Judy jokes now that he was never really a little kid. “He was always too smart for his own britches,” she says fondly.

He spent most of his days helping his parents at United Drug Store, founded by Preston’s paternal grandfather and owned today by his parents. It’s the only pharmacy in Hatch, and a one-stop shop for a village without a Walmart or Target. Over the years, Preston’s technological skills grew—and quickly became valuable. As a teenager, he changed his parents’ phone system, saving the business thousands of dollars. His dad, Greg Mitchell, was most impressed when Preston fixed their computer system from his phone while in the Atlanta airport.

“He was always learning, always interested,” Greg says. “He never said, ‘I can’t do that.’”

FRANZOY FAMILY

Shortly before fourth grade, Preston started spending September weekends selling his grandparents’ chile in Santa Fe. He climbed into his mamó’s pickup at 4 a.m., nodding off next to his cousins as country music played and they traveled three and a half hours north. By time they arrived at the corner of Cerrillos and Baca Streets, the roasters were firing. The family greeted about 200 customers a day. Many became friends over the years, eagerly awaiting bag after bag. In a typical year, the family sold 16,000 to 32,000 pounds of chile, luring customers with the smoky, pungent aroma of freshly roasted chile—the incense of New Mexico.

The big idea Preston had in the hotel room was to expand that lure—to reach even more customers by way of technology. He launched the virtual version of Berridge Farms during his fourth summer working for his grandparents. They sold about 2,000 pounds of online chile that first year, and Judy easily shipped orders from the Arrey post office, where she was postmaster. Preston’s mother, Barbara, saw how neatly her son’s business fix matched her forebear’s vision.

“The Internet took the place of Great-Grandpa driving with his cart and mule, personally going to each mom-and-pop store and individual homes peddling his wares,” she says.

The next year, Preston set up an official shipping system and sold 20,000 pounds. “I was excited it was working and that I could help my grandparents, but I didn’t really think it would turn into a business I would run at some point,” he says. Still a kid, he shared in the profits as his family’s chile sales continued to grow. In 2009 he graduated as high school valedictorian, alongside nine of his cousins, in a class of 103.

When he was a sophomore at New Mexico State University, Preston expanded his chile entrepreneurship with his then girlfriend Elaine, who had grown up in a farming family in Mesilla, a small town just west of Las Cruces. Preston’s dad built a concrete pad in front of their Hatch home where Preston roasted chiles with his college friends. He started a blog and called himself the Hatch Chile King. The couple soon graduated from NMSU with accounting jobs that gave them time off during chile season.

In 2014, the now-married couple folded their roasting business and bought a Las Cruces chile-roasting company, as well as his

grandparents' online business. They merged the enterprises, which they now operate online as Hatch Chile Store (hatch-green-chile.com), and specialize in high-end chile, raw and roasted. A conveyer-style roaster pampers the tender peppers, which are then hand-peeled. The farmers they work with stagger chile production so that four varieties—from mild to hot—last from mid-July through late October. This is not the same raw chile you might see at your grocery store in the fall; this chile is shipped the day it's picked and gets to customers no more than two days later.

"The time between the farm and your doorstep is nearly nothing," Preston says.

Preston and Elaine are consumed with making the business better, continuously tweaking their website and business practices with a goal of increasing wholesale and individual customers while also lowering the price. "We want something anyone can buy, while not compromising on quality," he says.

Each year they ship more chile, and this season they expect to support 60 to 75 workers, quite a leap from the two-person crew they had when they started. They also plan to ship at least 100 times more fresh chile than they did that first year, when Preston sold his first 2,000 pounds. And that doesn't include the roasted side of their business. It all looks like a success story, but Preston—who turns 26 this month—is reluctant to acknowledge it as that. "You can never say you've arrived," he says, "because then you will get lazy and soft."

Over the years, both Preston and Elaine have felt the pull of their farming roots but figured there was no opportunity to continue their family's legacy of farming. "There's just not enough to go around anymore," says Preston. "When I grew up, my uncle, grandpa, and great-grandpa were working the ground."

Still, they move forward in the branch of the business they can claim. In addition to their work, he and Elaine are focused on their baby son, Luke, the beginning of a sixth generation of Franzoys. They are grateful they found a niche that allows them to be a part of the valley's traditional agricultural community—and use their high-tech know-how to help that community continue feeding chile-heads all across the globe. "The world is changing around us, and you have to change with it or it is going to pass you by," Preston says. "We're dragging an ag business into the 21st century." ■

Deborah Busemeyer wrote about traditional colcha embroidery in the July issue.



NEW MEXICO TOURISM DEPARTMENT



JAY HEMPHILL (2)

DOWN THE HATCH

Almost as soon as it opened eight years ago on Hatch's busiest corner, Sparky's became a regional draw. Truckers and tourists turning into Hatch from I-25 can't resist Josie and Teako Nunn's quirkily colorful eatery. (That's their daughter Michelle Archer at left.)

You can get chile in almost any dish there, even the lemonade and milkshakes. I am usually torn between the tender brisket, the smoke-flavored green chile pulled-pork burrito, and the juicy char-grilled green chile cheeseburger. One customer couldn't handle choosing and created a meal that's now on the menu: the Oinker, a chile cheeseburger topped with pulled pork that's been slowly smoked over pecan wood out back.

Many of the ingredients are grown here in Hatch Valley, about 40 miles north of Las Cruces. Nunn estimates he goes through 100 pounds of green chile a day, serving about 2,000 people in a four-day week.

The food may produce long lines, but Teako appears with sausage samples, and a magician sometimes performs, keeping the vibe fun. Musicians jam on weekends, occasionally accompanied by customers' dancing. And then there are the giant figurines. You can't pass Sparky's without noticing the 25-foot-tall Uncle Sam next door, the custom-made robot holding a burger and shake across the street, or the eight-foot-tall A&W Root Beer family on the roof.

"Sparky's is the place Josie and I always wanted to turn a corner in a small town and find," says Nunn.

Open Thursday through Sunday, 10:30 a.m.–7 p.m.; (575) 267-4222; sparkysburgers.com —D.B.

Homemade in Hatch

Cook like a local with
these harvest-ready dishes.

BY DEBORAH BUSEMEYER PHOTOS BY DOUGLAS MERRIAM

World-famous Hatch green chiles acquire addictive powers once they're roasted.

THE HATCH VALLEY, south of Truth or Consequences, is considered the Chile Capital of the World. Descendants of chile pioneer Joseph Franzoy and other Hatch pepper buffs offer their favorite home-cooking recipes, just in time for the fall harvest. Most of the dishes that follow call for roasted green chile. For roasting instructions, plus more recipes, go to hatch-green-chile.com.

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Joe Franzoy's award-winning Green Chile Delight is classic Hatch comfort food.

JOE'S GREEN CHILE DELIGHT

This recipe by Joe Franzoy—son of Joseph Franzoy, the first commercial chile farmer in the Hatch Valley—won first place in the 1988 Hatch Chile Festival.

Serves 6

- ¼ pound ham, cubed
- 1 tablespoon oil
- 25 green chiles, roasted, peeled, and chopped
- 3 jalapeños, peeled and chopped
- 3 tomatoes, peeled and chopped
- ¼ teaspoon cumin
- ¾ teaspoon Lawry's Seasoned Salt
- 3 medium garlic cloves, finely chopped

1. Sauté ham in the oil in a large saucepan.
2. Add the rest of the ingredients, bring to a hard boil, and turn off. Serve as desired.

CREPE OLÉ

Serves 4–5

- 1 cup flour
- 2 eggs
- ½ cup half-and-half
- ½ cup water
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 2 tablespoons melted butter
- 6 whole green chiles
- 6 slices pepper jack cheese

1. In medium-size bowl, beat eggs, then whisk in flour. Gradually add half-and-half and water. Add salt and butter. In a griddle on medium-high heat, add ¼ cup batter. Tilt pan in circular motion and swirl so batter is even. Flip to other side.

FALL WRITING WORKSHOPS

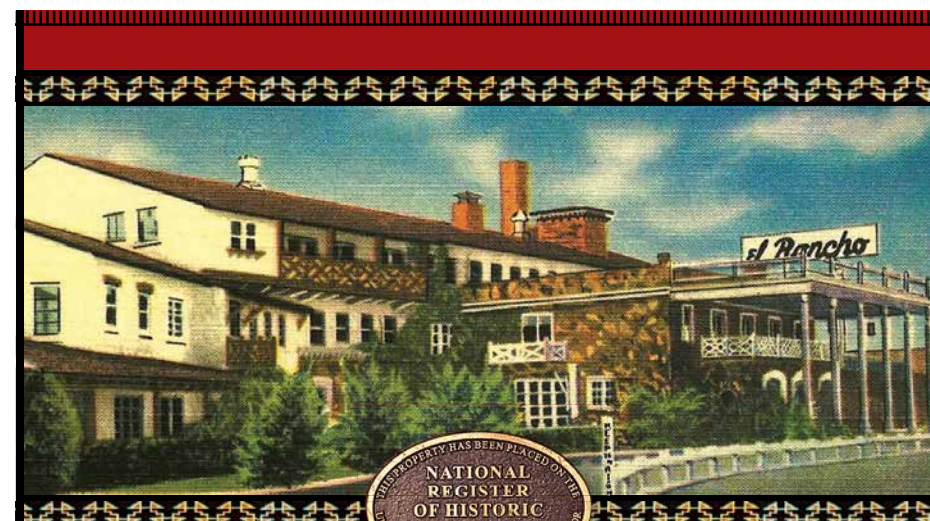


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- When six crepes are done, lay them on a cutting board. Place green chile in the middle of each crepe and cut crepe and chile in two. Place a half slice of pepper jack cheese on each before rolling up crepe.
- Makes 12 snacks that can be served cold with hummus, sour cream, or spreadable cheese. They can also be left whole and heated, like chiles rellenos.

Recipe by Claudette Ortiz Franzoy, wife of James Franzoy, Joseph Franzoy's grandson.

ELAINE'S GREEN CHILE PASTA

Serves 6-8

- 16 ounces farfalle pasta
- 1 lemon
- 2 diced tomatoes
- 2 cups diced green chile
- 2 chicken breasts, cooked and diced
- 1 cup fresh mozzarella cheese

- Boil water and cook pasta to al dente. Drain.
- Season chicken with salt and pepper and sauté in a medium-size skillet until heated through.
- Add pasta, diced tomato, and green chile to the skillet. When the mixture is warm, squeeze a lemon over the ingredients and sprinkle with cheese. Serve hot or cold.

Recipe by Elaine Mitchell, co-owner of the Hatch Chile Store and wife of Preston Mitchell, Joseph Franzoy's great-great-grandson.

From left: Crepe Olé by Claudette Ortiz Franzoy. Elaine Mitchell's green chile pasta.



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STUFFED EGGPLANT WITH GREEN CHILE

Serves 4

- 1 medium to large eggplant
- ¼ cup sliced mushrooms
- 2 tablespoons chopped onion
- 3 tablespoons green chile, roasted, peeled, and chopped
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 2 tablespoons flour

- 1 teaspoon salt
 - ½ teaspoon pepper
 - ½ cup cream
 - 3 tablespoons pimiento, chopped
 - 2 tablespoons butter or margarine
 - 1 cup Colby cheese, grated
1. Heat oven to 350° F. Cut out inside of eggplant, leaving shell. Remove eggplant pulp and cut into cubes. Cook in salted boiling water for 10 minutes.

2. While eggplant is cooking, sauté mushrooms, onion, chile, and garlic in butter or margarine. Stir in flour, salt, and pepper. Add well-drained eggplant, cream, and pimiento.
3. Fill eggplant shell with the mixture. Top with cheese. Bake for about 25–30 minutes, until cheese is melted.

Recipe by Patsy Ogaz Trujillo, daughter of Adrian Ogaz, a cotton and chile farmer in Hatch.

From left: Green chiles and green chile stew straight from Hatch.



GREEN CHILE STEW


Serves 8–10


- 2 pounds ground turkey
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon cumin
- 2 cups green chile, roasted, peeled, and chopped


1. Sear turkey in a hot skillet, then transfer to a Crock-Pot. Add the green chile, salt, garlic powder, and cumin.
2. Cover with lid and simmer for 2 hours or until meat is tender.


Recipe by Ozena Franzoy, wife of Marty Franzoy, Joseph Franzoy's great-grandson.




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SPARKY'S GREEN CHILE MILKSHAKE

Serves 1-2

- 20 ounces soft-serve ice cream (or substitute regular ice cream, slightly softened)
- ¼ cup green chile, roasted, peeled, and chopped.

Whip ingredients in a blender until combined.

Recipe by Josie and Teako Nunn, owners of Sparky's restaurant in Hatch. ■

restaurant guide

Farmers' markets all over the state are booming with the season's bounty, and our chefs are all too happy to take bushels of fresh produce and meats off the growers' hands and transform them into exquisite, unforgettable meals that taste even better when eaten out-of-doors on a restaurant's sun-dappled patio, or under a portal, or on a rooftop ...

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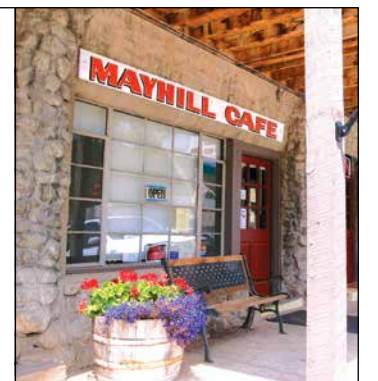
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