



5,567  
ESTIMATED

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# Something In the Water

In the hot springs of Truth or Consequences, reinvention starts with a soak. From there, in an out-there town where anything goes, who knows? You might end up in space.

By Molly Boyle

One morning in Truth or Consequences, I leave my *Twilight Zone* room on what feels like a journey to another dimension. I've spent a quiet night at Blackstone Hotsprings Lodging & Baths, where the kitschy rooms are named for 1950s television shows. Now, like most visitors to this strange—but strangely self-aware—spa destination along the Río Grande, 60 miles north of Las Cruces, I'm headed out to soak in a hot spring.

*Why do I keep coming back here?* That question winds through Hannah Jayanti's 2020 documentary *Truth or Consequences*, which I watched last night beside an impos-

ing photo of Rod Serling. It bubbles back into my mind as I wander the enigmatic streets of the town. Once called Hot Springs, Truth or Consequences gained its weird moniker in 1950, after TV host Ralph Edwards offered to broadcast a 10th-anniversary episode of his game show from any place in America that dared to rename itself after the program.

My main purpose in this place, which New Mexicans call T or C, is clear every time I visit: I come to take in the extra-hot waters. But Truth or Consequences has a bizarre, out-of-time allure that goes beyond its geothermal attractions. It seems to approach something like, as Serling's intro to *The*

In T or C, street art is often repurposed from what's been left behind. **Facing page:** Soakers at Riverbend Hot Springs may spot ducks gliding by on the Río Grande.







**“The Spaceport isn’t what’s going to make this place have its renaissance. It’s going to come from what was here all along—the hot springs.”**

—JAKE FOERSTNER, OWNER OF RIVERBEND HOT SPRINGS

Twilight Zone goes, “a wondrous land whose boundaries are that of imagination.”

On my walk, I pause to notice “WPA 1939” etched on the dusty sidewalk in front of me—a message from another time on a street that might reside in any era. A few blocks over, visitors hop on buses bound for Spaceport America’s launch complex, eager to learn about the space flights projected to transform tourism as we know it. The retro-futuristic contrast is jarring.

At a motel and bathhouse called Indian Springs, I pay \$5 to enter a no-frills bath hut built from lava rocks in 1927, and lower myself into the hottest spring I’ve ever experienced. A 110-degree reverie conjures all those who’ve soaked before me: Mimbres and Apache people, the first to reap the benefits of the mineral-rich hot water along the banks of

Truth or Consequences is not large, but it contains multitudes: a heap of historical layers, New Mexicans who were “born there all their lives,” and transplants drawn by the healing waters, the warm climate, and a certain freedom of expression that beams out from the many murals that decorate its buildings. Outside Desert Archaic, an art gallery on North Broadway, owners and 10-year residents Kyle Cunningham and Jeannie Ortiz explain that while the small town may seem stuck in the past, it’s in the midst of a revival.

the Río Grande; carousing cowboys of the 1880s who came down from the Black Range; road trippers of the 1940s, when Hot Springs boasted more than 40 mineral baths; and the freewheeling types who run galleries, shops, and spas today.

“The brewery changed everything,” Cunningham says, nodding toward Truth or Consequences Brewing Company. A few doors from the gallery, a vibrant, art-filled storefront and a backyard cluster of firepits serve as the town’s living room and craft-beer mecca. (The smooth Cosmic Blonde is a nod to T or C’s outré qualities.) Since the brewery nestled into the nucleus of T or C’s social life in 2017, Cunningham, a painter, and Ortiz, a fiber artist, have seen a steady trickle of new residents and businesses enlivening the old town. The pandemic brought even more new homeowners. “Now we walk into the brewery some nights and we don’t

**Above:** Blackstone Hot Springs’ TV-themed lodgings include a Superman room. **Facing page, from top:** Find artworks both profound and whimsical at Desert Archaic and Dust galleries.



even know anyone,” Ortiz says.

The new T or C has the same small-town charm as the old, but a stronger sense of community has emerged. Turtleback Coworking, a shared, 3,000-square-foot work space that opened last year, is designed around these newbies, many of whom are independently employed or working remotely. Every second Saturday night of the month, residents mingle at Art Hop, a downtown art walk that tends to spawn jam sessions in the streets. And last year, after the 1933 El Cortez movie theater, on Main Street, was sold to a local group, it reopened to screen first-run films.

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**Clockwise from left:** Funky public art is everywhere. The taproom is the town's social center. Rio Bravo Fine Art Gallery owner Eduardo Alicea presents gay cowboy paintings by Delmas Howe. The Sierra Grande Lodge. Vintage cars abound. La Baracca offers impeccable Italian, casually. Alicea's gallery.



Projectionist Moshe Koenick says enthusiastic audiences lined up around the block during last fall's T or C Film Fiesta.

"T or C has these little start-stop moments," says Jake Foerstner, the second-generation owner of Riverbend Hot Springs. "As a kid growing up in this town, you're like: *Is anything ever going to happen here?*" Foerstner moved back to his hometown after the announcement of Spaceport America, aiming to grow the family business before a possible boom. After a few years he realized, "The Spaceport isn't what's going to make this place have its renaissance. It's going to come from what was here all along—the hot springs."

transplant as songwriter of the year.

As executive director of MainStreet Truth or Consequences, Blackspur seeks to fill as many voids as possible in T or C. During the height of the pandemic in 2020, she worried about how visitors might view a dark downtown during the holidays and offered to buy timers for any business willing to put up lights. "I bought like 10 Christmas trees and shoved them into this courtyard," she says, pointing to the trumpet-vined flagstone patio at the Giddy Up. "During Art Hops, I would just set up and play for anyone who walked by."

**"Many people believe the town is an entity. I've been told by a lot of locals that this place will decide on you, not the other way around."**

—CAFÉ OWNER  
ROOSTER BLACKSPUR

Blackspur opened the café in January 2021, drawing on a trove of mostly self-taught culinary wisdom and pledging to bring fans to

her new hometown while Covid limited her touring schedule. On the Sunday morning we meet there, the Giddy Up is filled with locals and tourists enjoying her small but sumptuous weekly brunch menu, which shows off Blackspur's down-home cooking with locally sourced ingredients.

Those seeking a more throwback dining experience tend to end up under the swinging 1970s archways of Los Arcos Steakhouse, where time seems to have frozen since the restaurant opened 52 years ago with a surf-and-turf-centric menu. Longtime owner Bobby Middleton says the business has its own kind of refresh rate. "We have a good local crowd, but people also just keep passing through," he says. "We don't really change anything around here. People like that."

In the *Truth or Consequences* film, poet Olin West says, "It is not the shape or surface that gives life to a place, but the dust."



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Clockwise: A casita's private tub at Riverbend. Locals stroll down North Broadway. Rooster Blackspur at her Giddy Up Café.



I think of T or C's mineral-rich dust while chatting with West outside his home, built as an early-1900s bunkhouse for the men who constructed Elephant Butte Dam. It's now a wonder house of found art, West's books and landscape paintings (he shows work at Desert

Archaic), and beautifully repurposed detritus from abandoned places nearby. In West's sun-drenched backyard, the creative possibilities seem endless. I start to understand something else residents keep telling me: T or C has its own way of reckoning

FIND YOUR TRUTH—AND ENJOY THE CONSEQUENCES

**Soak.** T or C has eight hot springs with a range of prices and experiences. On the high end, enjoy the views at **Riverbend Hot Springs**. Guests and spa clients can dip into the baths at **Sierra Grande Lodge**. For a more modest price, **Blackstone Hotsprings** and the **Pelican Spa** deliver vintage vibes, while locals love the **Charles Motel**. [nmmag.us/torc](http://nmmag.us/torc)

**Shop.** Start on Main Street and loop around North Broadway to discover art, books, antiques, gifts, and retro treasures. Attend the monthly **Art Hop** (second Saturdays) to see the latest works from a town full of artists. [nmmag.us/torc](http://nmmag.us/torc)

**Explore.** The **Healing Waters Trail**, a three-mile loop around downtown, is a journey through hot springs history that winds through the desert, past the Rio Grande, and back downtown. **Spaceport America's** guided tours depart from its visitor center in Truth or Consequences. [nmmag.us/torc](http://nmmag.us/torc), [spaceportamerica.com](http://spaceportamerica.com)

**Eat.** Grab a green chile cheeseburger combo at **A & B Drive-In** and pretend you're back in the fab fifties.  **Mile Marker 7 Coffee**, a newer café, offers a daytime buzz and small bites. [nmmag.us/torc](http://nmmag.us/torc)

**Learn.** The **Geronimo Springs Museum** houses a stunning collection of Mimbres and Tularosa pottery, a miner's cabin from the Black Range, an exhibit devoted to Apache history, and a room of game show memorabilia. [nmmag.us/torc](http://nmmag.us/torc)

**Stay.** **Blackstone Hotsprings** pays homage to the town's TV history with themed luxury rooms (*Star Trek*, *The Golden Girls*) that include in-room hot springs features, as well as three private outdoor baths. [blackstonehotsprings.com](http://blackstonehotsprings.com)

with whoever comes to town.

"There's a different set of values that people are judged by here," Cunningham tells me. "It's not a fancy yard or a nice house or a lawn. It's more like 'What kind of person are you? What can you make here?'" That echoes something Blackspur said at the Giddy Up. "Many people believe the town is an entity. I've been told by a lot of locals that this place will decide on you, not the other way around."

Later, in a private tub at Blackstone Hotsprings, I watch the moon play coy behind a bank of clouds silhouetted by a palm tree. It emerges to illuminate the rippled dreamscape of the steaming water. *I might as well be in the Twilight Zone*, I think as a weird wave of calm settles over me. I get why I keep coming back here. **MM**

Senior editor **Molly Boyle** has a history of scoring excellent vintage Pyrex dishes in Truth or Consequences.

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all the amenities. Summer evenings include live music and, more often than not, you can't help but tap your toes along with friendly locals and visitors alike.

Elephant Butte is neighbors with Truth or Consequences where natural hot springs will renew your feeling of good health, Spaceport where commercial space travel is taking off, and the Village of Hatch with their world-famous green chili.

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# Oldest Town, Newest Vibes

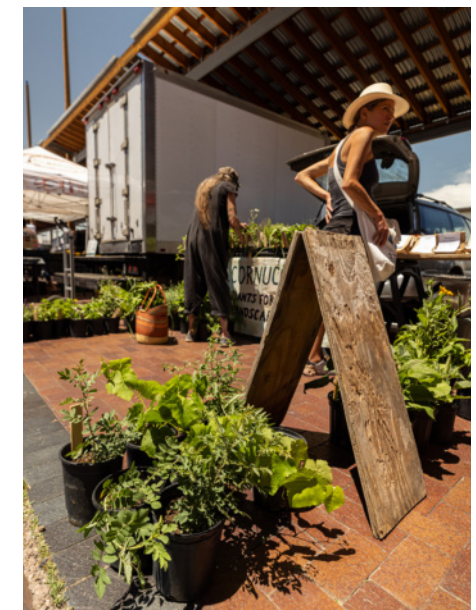
Santa Fe's freshest crop of creatives is reinventing a red-hot arts scene by making room for everyone. **By Molly Boyle**

**W**ITH ITS EYE-POPPING HOLLY-hocks, bright ristras, and New Deal-era frescoes painted by Will Shuster, the courtyard at the New Mexico Museum of Art is a place of beauty and history. The museum's collection includes the artists, many of them transplants like Shuster, who comprised the Santa Fe art colony, which saw its heyday before World War II. Still, despite the inviting elegance of its Pueblo Revival building, the 105-year-old museum is not anyone's idea of the most happening place in town.

One evening at the museum this June, however, the sounds of Stevie Wonder gave way to a ranchera ballad. The molecules in the galleries' rarefied air seemed to rearrange themselves. At Raashan Ahmad's free two-hour DJ set, carefully crafted as a musical response to the exhibition *Poetic Justice*:

*Judith F. Baca, Mildred Howard, and Jaune Quick-to-See Smith*, a diverse crowd of mostly locals boogied down, singing along to nineties hip-hop while taking in social justice-focused artworks and poetry.

This kind of multicultural, multimedia, and multigenerational art happening is becoming commonplace in Santa Fe, heralding a new flowering of creativity at the nucleus of one of America's most storied art scenes. Powered by the hard work and activism of recent arrivals and longtime residents alike, Santa Fe's arts and culture landscape is embracing fresh ideas and perspectives. As the sharp, ultramodern profile of the art museum's new Vladem Contemporary building rises in the Railyard District, grassroots collectives, upstart galleries, and community-minded artists are redefining the boundaries of Santa Fe culture, going beyond museum walls



**Clockwise from left:** Owner Frank Rose at Hecho Gallery, with a Ricardo Angeles painting. Plants for sale at the Santa Fe Farmers' Market. A lush patio at Iconik Lupe, a coffeshop in a former Catholic school. **Facing page:** Santa Fe Railyard concerts draw a crowd.





and traditional stages to make room for a new chorus of creative voices.

“Something is happening here,” says Ahmad. “I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else right now.”

Chalk up the changes, in part, to younger creatives like Ahmad, who spent years breezing through town as a touring hip-hop artist before moving his family here in 2013. As the executive director of Vital Spaces, a nonprofit that helps to provide art studios to under-represented people in Santa Fe’s commercial art scene, he plays a part in the explosion of opportunities for emerging and low-income artists. By repurposing the city’s empty spaces—untenanted buildings or properties awaiting redevelopment or sale—Vital Spaces nurtures a community of individuals who, given the current real estate squeeze, might otherwise be shut out of Santa Fe. (I was a lucky beneficiary: Vital Spaces granted me a writing studio for most of 2021.)

The organization also provides gallery space; a community art closet, where art-

ists can choose tools for their arsenal from donated supplies; and a packed social schedule of openings, dance parties, art workshops, and events. One former Vital Spaces artist, Justin Rhody, has co-founded No Name Cinema, which offers by-donation screenings of historic and contemporary experimental films.

“I don’t think the city really realizes how much has changed,” says Ahmad, who also sits on the Santa Fe Arts Commission and co-founded the city’s Earthseed Black Arts Alliance in 2020. “So many people are here who are working on projects, opening up galleries, starting theater companies. There’s a whole lot of art and culture happening, especially at the beginning stages.”

Pointing to the profusion of new galleries, breweries, and coffeeshops in the Railyard District, he adds, “Even though a lot of sales come from tourism, people are thinking about how to make sure that locals are involved in Santa Fe. There’s a lot of awareness around how to make sure that when people are opening galleries or restaurants, they’re still making

**“Something is happening here. I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else right now.”**

—VITAL SPACES EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RAASHAN AHMAD



**From left:** Exodus Ensemble’s Kya Brickhouse, Jayson Lee, and April Cleveland. Arts change-maker Raashan Ahmad, in the Vital Spaces Fashion Outlets studio of artist Jesse Wood.

sure to keep the local traditions and local culture ingrained.”

**THE CITY’S MOST INTERESTING CREATIVE ENERGY** is powered by artists who fill a void.

In 2019, Houston native Frank Rose founded Hecho a Mano, a print-focused gallery on Canyon Road, because he wanted to sell art at reasonable price points. “There weren’t a lot of galleries showing prints, and certainly not affordable prints,” he says. “It really felt like an opportunity to show this work here.”

Last spring, Rose opened Hecho Gallery, which centers on artists who live in New Mexico and Mexico. The second gallery is nestled into a historic building on Palace Avenue, a few doors west of the New Mexico Museum of Art. In the 1930s, the building housed arts maven Leonora Curtin’s Native Market, and it was home to the influential Elaine Horwitch Gallery in the 1980s and ’90s.

Santa Fe artists also mine the city’s complex cultural past for inspiration. Enrique Figueredo, a former Vital Spaces artist who has shown work at Hecho a Mano, emigrated from Venezuela as a child and has lived in Santa Fe on and off for more than a decade. Figueredo’s *Pasó por Aquí* series marries woodblock prints of mission churches to sandstone inscriptions from Spanish explorers who passed through what is now El Morro National Monument. The series also includes the mark-making of invasive bark



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**From left:** Murals by Will Shuster at the New Mexico Museum of Art. The Vladem Contemporary rises behind the 1909 depot. Hecho artist Daniel McCoy's *Sunset with Circles*, 2022.

beetles, or fir engravers, who score abstract hieroglyphs into trees in the national forests. “The conquest was an invasive, destructive species,” says Figueredo, comparing Spanish colonists to the bark beetles. “The bark beetle and the inscriptions, together, I think, have that dialogue of destruction and conversion. I’m hoping that I’m creating a conversation by retelling an old story. Why not just tell it again, right? Especially right now, when a lot of people feel their rights are being challenged.”

**THE VERDANT FIELDS OF REUNITY RESOURCES** community farm in Agua Fria village, now bursting with the produce of high summer, also tell a very old story. “There is archaeological evidence of agriculture in this river valley for at least 7,000 years,” says Reunity’s program director, Juliana Peterson Ciano. In 2019, the self-described “regenerative nonprofit” took over the two-acre property previously known as the Santa Fe Community

Farm and upcycled it with a soil and compost yard, a farm stand, a food truck, an education center, a community fridge packed with fresh and free produce, and a concert and event space. “We’re trying to look at our approach to food systems and health on both an immediate and long-term level,” says Ciano. “There’s a 10-day plan and a 30-year plan.” Besides programs that promote food sovereignty and provide resources to younger and fledgling farmers, Reunity has emerged as a wildly popular arts venue. The outdoor stage plays host to everyone from toddlers in the Sunday-morning creative movement classes to bluegrass and electronic music acts. One Friday night this summer, I watched a crowd of Santa Feans dancing outside in the monsoon rains, enjoying both a burgeoning sense of community and a closer connection to the land.

Reunity’s farm is a favorite space of the Exodus Ensemble, a 11-person immersive theater troupe that made Santa Fe its home in 2020. Primarily made up of graduates from the Theatre School at DePaul University, in Chicago, the multicultural



DANIEL MCCOY PAINTING: COURTESY OF HECHO GALLERY

and geographically diverse group of actors, ages 23 to 34, was coaxed by director April Cleveland to relocate to New Mexico in the early days of the pandemic.

Most of the company members live together in a residence on the east side of town—and, in a seemingly fated callback to the days of the Santa Fe art colony, they perform at the 96-year-old Acequia Madre House, the onetime home of none other than Leonora Curtin. In the 1930s, the Curtin Theater hosted such artsy guests as Mary Austin and Witter Bynner. Now, Exodus’s roving, experimental production of *Ivanov*, based on a Chekhov play, takes audiences on a tour of the historic estate over the course of a nearly four-hour performance.

New York City native Kya Brickhouse, a performer with Exodus, says the success of

the ensemble may not have happened anywhere else. “What keeps me in Santa Fe are the people. There is a sense of giving like no other, whether that be the art on the street or the donation model we’re able to operate under,” she says. “Especially as a Black artist, in a place where there’s not a lot of me, people are just so freakin’ welcoming. It makes sense that this is where I need to call home.”

Exodus members learned to honor another Santa Fe tradition originated by the last century’s artists: the annual burning of Zozobra. “We’d been here for maybe three days,” recalls Cleveland, “and I was like, ‘So guys, there’s this thing where they burn a massive effigy.’” “I was into it!” exclaims Jayson Lee, an Exodus player who hails from Georgia.

“The idea of writing my glooms down and burning them is a practice that carries over multiple cultures anyway,” says Brickhouse. “It felt like I was already connected to this place in a different kind of way, coming from my background.”

**IN THE FACE OF SPLASHY HAPPENINGS CREATED BY NEWER ARTISTS,** longtime residents are digging their heels into the arts and culture landscape to ensure they are represented. “Santa Fe has always been very good about using the very little resources we have for our community members to make the best of it,” says Alma Castro.

The second-generation owner of Café Castro on Cerrillos Road, Castro chairs the Santa Fe Arts Commission, where she focuses on creating artistic opportunities for the city’s immigrant, Hispana/o, and Southside communities. After taking over the day-to-day operations of serving New Mexican food at her family’s 32-year-old restaurant, she commissioned three murals at Café Castro that pay tribute to those roots.

*Nuestra Señora de FantaSe*, an outline of the Virgen de Guadalupe, was painted on the building’s stucco exterior in 2021. “Guadalupe is very much a symbol of resistance within our community,” says Castro. “It was painted by Reyes Padilla, a Santa Fe artist who moved to Albuquerque because there wasn’t support for him here.”

Castro says her community’s struggle for support from arts administrators is ongoing. But grassroots arts organizations like Alas de Agua Art Collective, an intersectional group devoted to uplifting marginalized artists, are helping. Alas de Agua’s commissioned mural at the café pays tribute to Indigenous people with a rendering of Quetzalcoatl.

Another mural, by Santiago Lucero, depicts Castro’s family members. “It speaks to the trajectory of migration,” Castro explains. “My mom is from here and my dad is from El Salvador. A lot of restaurants in town are run by my family members. It’s reminding us that our kitchen is so much bigger than just Castro’s, and so much bigger than Santa Fe.”

For Santo Domingo Pueblo artist Ricardo Caté, who draws the *Without Reservations* comic strip for *The Santa Fe New Mexican*, holding onto his place in Santa Fe’s Native arts scene meant deviating from tradition. For the past few years, Caté has eschewed applying for a booth at Santa Fe Indian Market in favor of the new Free Indian Market, begun in 2018.

**“I’m hoping that I’m creating a conversation by retelling an old story. Why not just tell it again, right?”**

—ARTIST ENRIQUE FIGUEREDO

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A 2020 mural by Three Sisters Collective, an Indigenous group, honors the Tewa roots of O'Ga Po'Geh.



With a mission “to honor the elders and respect the artists,” the alt-market was created by Gregory Schaaf to showcase artists that had not been juried into Indian Market by the Southwestern Association for Indian Arts (SWAIA). It has grown to feature nearly 600 Indigenous artists this year at Federal Park, just two blocks from Indian Market on the Plaza.

“I was really up for this concept of having a free market, with artists not paying for a booth or parking fees,” says Caté, who grew up helping his parents in their booth every year at Indian Market. “It intrigued me. I was one of the first artists to sign up for it.”

Free Indian Market, he says, embodies the original spirit of the 100-year-old Indian Market. “It’s the Pueblo people that pretty much started this whole thing, so I love the

idea that it’s reverting back to that. A lot of these artists who really count on this show around this time of year—it’s their bread and butter—now they have this outlet. I really like Gregory’s concept of honoring not just the artists but the elders.”

GO WHERE THE LOCALS GO

“It’s my favorite place on the planet,” **Vital Spaces** executive director **Raashan Ahmad** says of Santa Fe. “There’s the tourist part, that’s kind of like Disneyland. But for the most part, a lot of folks are trying to find out where the other stuff lies.” We asked a few Santa Feans what they would do on a perfect day in town.

“On the way to **fishing or hiking in the Pecos**,” says **Café Castro** owner **Alma Castro**, “I’ll go out to either **Harry’s Roadhouse** or **Café Fina**. I like the huevos motuleños at Harry’s, but I’ll often get the blue corn piñon pancakes. And I love to get coffee at **Dulce Capital**.”

**Exodus Ensemble** director **April Cleveland** would start with a visit to the **Santa Fe Farmers’ Market** and **Evoke Contemporary** gallery in the Railyard. **Dinner for Two**, on North Guadalupe Street, “has the most extraordinary happy hour in Santa Fe, with eight drinks from \$5 to \$8.” In the evening, “I’d walk into **the Railyard** and hear some live music.”

**Hecho** and **Hecho a Mano** gallerist **Frank Rose** digs the lunch menu at **Opuntia**, a teahouse that also contains a greenhouse. For cutting-edge contemporary art by New Mexico artists, he endorses an afternoon spent browsing **Title Gallery**, **Smoke the Moon**, and **The Bat and the Buffalo**.

“I’ll go to the **Pantry** and have the Buenos Días—add vegan sausage, mushrooms, and avocado, scrambled eggs, Christmas,” says Exodus Ensemble member **Kya Brickhouse**. “I like to people-watch in the **Plaza**. I love **Art Vault** in the Railyard; it’s very inspiring. After dinner at **Izanami**, I might end up at **La Reina** [the bar at the **El Rey Inn**] and have a Negroni. Hopefully there’s live music and I can sit on the patio.”

Exodus member **Jayson Lee** recommends a milkshake at **Kakawa Chocolate House**, taking in a “cute little live event” at the **Jean Cocteau Cinema**, dinner at **Sweetwater Harvest Kitchen** (don’t miss the vegan flatbread), and “looking up at the stars in our backyard.”

**AHMAD, HECHO’S FRANK ROSE, REUNITY’S CIANO**, and the Exodus artists are each careful to point out that as residents of Santa Fe, they are conscious of their occupation of unceded Tewa land. In tribute to the original artists of O’Ga Po’Geh, or White Shell Water Place, they see themselves as part of a long tradition of artistic synchronicity in what we now call Santa Fe. It’s the sense of a deep-seated creative community here—and the new shape it’s taking on—that intrigues everyone.

In the flower-filled courtyard of Iconik Lupe, a former Catholic school that was repurposed into a third-wave coffeeshop in 2018, members of the Exodus Ensemble tell me a story that illustrates the harmony they’re finding in Santa Fe. When the collective first moved to town, they lived on Artist Road, in a trio of adjoining casitas that were set to be demolished. One night, the lights inexplicably flickered off.

Uncertain of the cause, the group drifted up to the rooftop, where they had a discussion that ended in a collective communion. Forming a circle, they held hands and took a deep breath in unison.

“The moment we released the breath,” says Kya Brickhouse, “the lights turned back on.” **NM**

*Senior Editor Molly Boyle listens to Zozobra’s screams of agony every September from her yard in Santa Fe’s Guadalupe District.*

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# Coal Posts

Mining helped build the town of Ratón—and then nearly killed it. Now entrepreneurs and city leaders look ahead to brighter days, with new businesses, outdoor recreation, and a shared love for the past.

By Kate Nelson

**G**ERALDINE CHICARELLI DAVIS TEETERS atop a sharply cut bank, peering into the sluggish creek below. She remembers when it flowed with enough force for children to splash and swim for days. She remembers her parents' home rising behind her, and all the other homes, and all the other families of miners along the main dirt road and the faint ones leading into the nearby canyons. All of them were drawn to work in some of the richest coal mines in the nation.

"We had the childhood that a lot of children could envy," she says, tears teasing the corners of her eyes. "We had the run of the creeks and hills and roads. It seemed like we were all a big family, all ethnic groups—German, Japanese, Scottish, everything."

An early autumn wind sweeps across this uninhabited valley on the Ted Turner Reserve's Vermejo Ranch, which butts up to the city of Ratón's western edge. Foundations of forgotten houses are about all that proves what Chicarelli Davis remembers: the top-producing coal-mining town of Brilliant, just one of the company towns that once fanned out from Ratón—Sugarite, Dawson, and Van Houten also among them.

From 1873 to 2003, they gave the people on this volcanic cap of northeastern New Mexico some of the best-paying jobs they ever saw. But where houses, schools, social halls, and even a hospital once stood, little remains. The occasional glimpse of an old quarried-rock mule barn. A gated-off mine entrance. A series of crumbling coke ovens.

A special tour organized by the Raton Museum and Vermejo staff drew Chicarelli Davis, who now lives in Colorado, along with members of her family and an assortment of history hounds, to explore a few of the towns that were on what's now the Vermejo. The Turner property hopes to make it an annual excursion beyond the ranch's locked gates. The trip also is a good example of the way residents of Ratón honor their past while striving toward a more prosperous future.



Nearly every person I meet on the tour cites a personal tie to that past—Ratón's mines, or its old horse-racing venue, or the ranches scattered across the high plains. They share not only a remembrance of better days but a drive to bolster their hometown pride with a 21st-century spin that embraces outdoor enthusiasts, art lovers, and the film industry—plus a flight or two of craft brew.

"We're at a point where we're finally able to revitalize Ratón," Brenda Ferri says over a hearty lunch at the 111 Park restaurant and



A window looks out at one of the mining towns on the Vermejo Ranch. **Facing page:** An iron gate blocks the Swastika Mine.

coffeehouse, in the heart of downtown. She leads the city's MainStreet program and the Raton Arts and Humanities Council, which runs the Old Pass Gallery, and she operates the Heirloom Shop, an antiques store. The MainStreet program just completed the



state's first Great Blocks project, with sidewalk and landscape improvements, and obtained a Verizon grant to install signage in the downtown area. "We've got young people coming in, a distillery, breweries, a really cool arts vibe," she says. "The other night, I drove down and there were so many cars, so we're getting a bit of nightlife, too."

Kayvan Khalatbari, a Colorado entrepreneur who had tired of Denver's explosive growth, purchased the long-closed El Raton Theatre last year and has already held events in it even as he tackles renovations. (The Spaghetti & Westerns Festival in October invited film and pasta buffs to events in both Ratón and Trinidad, Colorado, 21 miles north; some of them went between the two the old-fashioned way, via Amtrak.) He's also building greenhouses for organic fruits and vegetables to be sold at co-op markets in Ratón and Trinidad, and creating even more

jobs with a cricket farm whose products will end up in pet food and fertilizer.

Other investors are laying plans to transform the WPA-era Kearny Elementary School into a 4D film studio—the only one of its kind in the state—and will train residents for film industry jobs through a partnership with Santa Fe Community College.

The Raton Pass Motor Inn revels in its midcentury-modern past, proof positive that travelers will flock to properties that mix authenticity with a bit of sass. LA JEFA SAID CHANGE THE SIGN SO I DID, reads the motel's turquoise-colored marquee the day I check in. In the downtown area, a handful of turn-of-the-century properties (think pressed-tin ceilings and wide-plank floors) await rebirth, something Khalatbari expects sooner rather than later. "I've found it much easier to work in Ratón than Colorado," he says. "I think New Mexico is on its way up."

SCOTT BERRY'S MOM WAS BORN TO ENGLISH parents who came over so that her father could work at Sugarite's mine, about six miles northeast of Ratón. It's now part of Sugarite Canyon State Park, which has interpretive trails through the town that was. Trained in civil engineering, Berry worked for the York Canyon Mine—the last of the breed—before becoming Ratón city manager in 2014. One of his big goals is to attract more tourists with expanded outdoor recreation.

Besides the hiking, camping, and fishing opportunities at Sugarite, he notes, Climax Canyon, in the heart of town, offers three miles of forested trails. Hikers and bikers can obtain a pass from City Hall to travel over the Old Pass Road—the original link between Colorado and New Mexico, which frontiersman "Uncle Dick" Wootton once charged a toll to use. Capulin Volcano National Monument looms 32 miles to the east, with trails



**"We had the childhood that a lot of children could envy. We had the run of the creeks and hills and roads. It seemed like we were all a big family."**

—GERALDINE CHICARELLI DAVIS

on the rim and down below. Efforts are underway to add the 2,000-acre Bartlett Mesa Ranch to Sugarite's 3,600 acres. Working with the Nature Conservancy, the Trust for Public Land, and the State of Colorado, Ratón aims to create a bi-state attraction that pulls travelers off I-25 for an extended weekend.

"We're in the middle of everything—Denver, Albuquerque, and Amarillo, Texas," Berry says, adding that the pandemic's work-from-home opportunities helped at least one sector of the city. "We're seeing a strong demand for housing. Colorado and Texas people can sell at the top of the market, get away from traffic and crime, and come to a quiet town."

1956 vintage verve. "We were 97.7 percent full this month," Brown says during a rare lull in the couple's action.

They changed next to nothing in the period decor developed by previous owner Laurie "Bunnie" Bunker. Rooms carry themes like Classic Movie Cowboy and Lucky 13, and breakfast includes the tiny boxes of cereal that lodgers remember from their youth.

"We've seen newer businesses come in

Michael Brown and Brandy Dietz bought into that vision when they purchased the Raton Pass Motor Inn in 2020. The former Dallas residents had frequently stayed at the motel while traveling to Denver and came to adore its

A stone building at Brilliant. **Facing page, from left:** An antique truck at the Raton Pass Motor Inn. Sisters Gladys Bacca and Geraldine Chicarelli Davis at their onetime home.

already," Dietz says, "hip and local people investing in this community." One of their goals is to develop guided tours, including bike tours, of places like Sugarite and the nearby NRA Whittington Center, a 33,000-acre spread with a variety of shooting ranges and winding dirt roads, as well as the former mining town of Van Houten.

Visitors can get a grounding in all the region's mines at the Raton Museum, in a stone Romanesque Revival building on Second Street. Director and curator Roger



Visitors on the Vermejo mine tour. **Facing page, clockwise from top left:** El Raton Theatre. The star atop Goat Hill. Locally made Ratonia TVs in the Raton Pass Motor Inn lobby. A luscious slice at Bruno's Pizza & Wings.

Sanchez delights in walking visitors through the exhibits, which include old mining equipment, a “danger” sign in six languages, and a wealth of historic photographs of towns that held hundreds of lives at a time. When the mines closed, the companies didn’t care to pay taxes on the buildings, so they either moved them to other mines or let residents deconstruct them and keep the parts. Some carted the square four-room houses to new neighborhoods in Ratón.

“You can still see some of them in the old parts of town—if you know what to look for,” Sanchez says.

Staring at an image of a place that held sturdy two-story gathering sites, baseball fields, post offices, and churches, places that have all but vanished, I’m struck by how fragile the material world turns out to be. Who’s to say whether any town that’s hit with an economic wallop will survive.



**TOP OF THE WORLD**

Nestled near the towering Ratón Pass, the town of Ratón bursts with things to do.

**Stay.** Lodgers with a taste for the past adore the **Raton Pass Motor Inn**. Vintage car clubs are welcome. For a splurge-worthy stay, consider lodging and/or special activities at the **Ted Turner Reserves Vermejo Ranch**.

**Eat.** In the downtown area, get your fill at the **Gate City Craft Bar**, **Colfax Ale Cellar**, **Bruno’s Pizza & Wings**, and **111 Park**, where you’re likely to meet some of the city fathers who gather there daily.

**Explore.** Learn about the region’s mining history at the **Raton Museum**, then head out to the interpretive trails at **Sugarite Canyon State Park** and the **NRA Whittington Center**. (Call the Whittington Center a day before to ensure the road to the old town of Van Houten is open.)

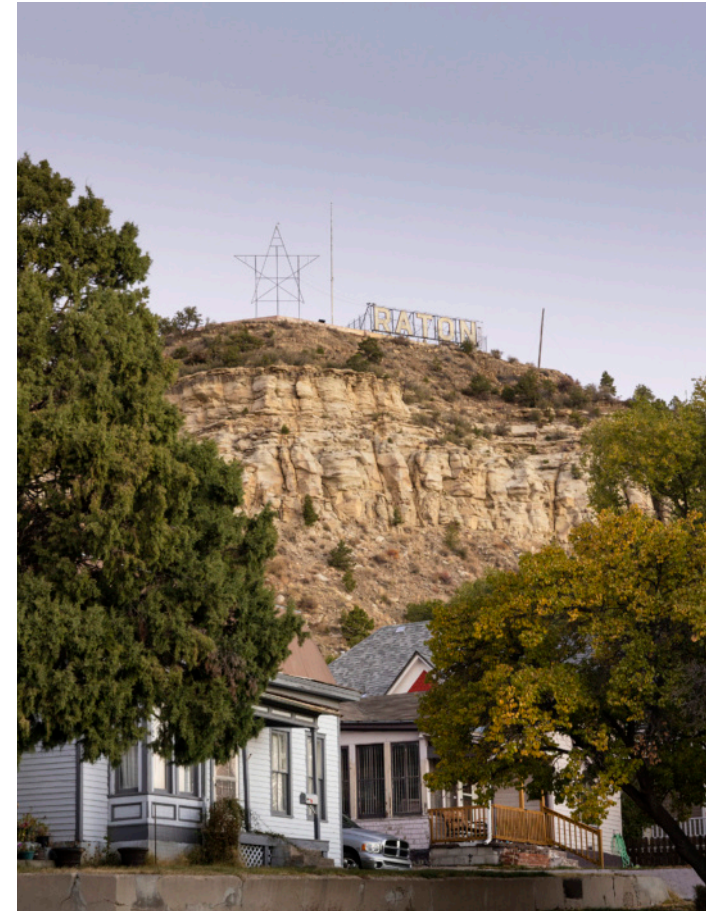
**Shop.** The **Heirloom Shop**, **Santa Fe Trail Mercado**, and **Score Antique Shop** hold treasures large and small. **Solano’s Boot & Western Wear** will dude you up like a cowboy, and its tack shop can repair anything under the sun.

**Get outside.** Hit the trails in town at **Climax Canyon** or head out to **Capulin Volcano National Monument** or **Sugarite Canyon State Park** for a true nature experience. The state park also welcomes anglers at Lake Maloya and has seasonal campsites. Reservations recommended.

**ANDY AND FABIE SOLANO REPRESENT HOPE** for the long haul. In 1956, they moved from Las Vegas, New Mexico, to join Andy’s brother in a shoe repair business he purchased on Ratón’s main drag. They eventually took it over and grew Solano’s Boot & Western Wear into an emporium stretching half a city block that includes a veritable museum of bearskins, animal mounts, and well-worn hats donated by local cowboys.

“We’ve seen the town decline,” Fabie says, “but it hasn’t hurt us a whole lot.” Their kids and grandkids handle the internet sales for them and welcome customers, who include local ranch workers as well as actors Sam Elliott, Val Kilmer, and Tom Selleck. “When the town found out he was here,” Fabie says of Selleck, “we had to lock the doors.”

The resilience of star power also reigns a half block away, where the 1915 Shuler Theater still packs in crowds to enjoy local and touring shows, as well as its pristine Rococo design. Brenda Ferri has a key to it,







so we slip in and can't even get to the 451-seat auditorium before the lobby murals have me stunned, head cocked back in full gawkery.

Painted by Ratón native Manville Chapman as part of a WPA project, the murals depict eras of the city's past, including its earliest days as Willow Springs, before a baffling 1880 name change to the Spanish word for a mouse. "Sometimes I wish we could change it back," Ferri says with a smile.

She ducks backstage while I climb into an opera box overlooking the stage to watch as she works the rigging to bring down the original fire curtain, a massive watercolor depicting the Palisades, in nearby Cimarrón Canyon. The care that went into preserving not just one curtain but an entire theater testifies to Ratón's skill for carrying the past into the future.

"Our town still needs a toy store, a sport-

**From top:** The lavish interior of the Shuler Theater. Kayvan Khalatbari inside his El Raton Theatre.

ing goods store, a bookstore," Ferri says. "But we have a ghost." The spirit of Evelyn Shuler, daughter of the physician and mayor for whom the theater was named, so loved the performing arts that even death can't keep her away. "I've never seen her," Ferri says. "But I've had professional actors doing Shakespeare who told me, 'She watched the show tonight.'"

Perhaps, like a lot of very living, very active, and very forward-looking people, Miss Evelyn just can't bear to leave. **NM**

*Managing Editor Kate Nelson never misses an opportunity to combine a hike with history.*



Contemporary Voices

JOSEPHINE HALVORSON

OCTOBER 1, 2021-MARCH 28, 2022

Josephine Halvorson (b. 1981). *O'Keeffe's Skulls*, 2019-20. Gouache, site material, and screen print on panels. Courtesy of the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

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