

The Gastronomical They



A SUNDAY REPAST AMONG CHEFS



Top: Eric DiStefano (left) prepares the mixed grill that Sigfredo Montalvo (right, at left) and Eduardo Rodriguez (far right), plate for an afternoon feast at DiStefano's house. Above: Bernie Rusanowski of Saveur arranges one of his French menu mainstays, a caprese salad. Opposite: David and Heather Sellers of Amavi clown around with Eric.

Coming into Eric DiStefano and Sara Chapman's house in Las Campanas is in some ways like walking into their downtown restaurant, Coyote Café. The couple's two-year-old place opens into an area with bare, white walls punctuated by only a formal dining table and black and red leather furniture grouped around a fireplace. Likewise, Coyote's dark, ballroom staircase sweeping upward from its Water Street doors might make you wonder if formality rules. But round a corner in the house or summit the stairs in the restaurant, and the same thought springs to mind, mouth, and nose: This is going to be seriously tasty—and fun.

Last November, Eric and Sara bought the internationally known foodie haunt with friends Tori Mendes (Coyote's general manager since 2004) and Quinn Stephenson (who started at Coyote as a busboy a decade ago, then quickly became its beverage director), and the partners have all been running at triple speed ever since. So they like to spend their day off, Sunday, with pals. On this sunny Sunday afternoon Eric and Sara have invited an extended family to hang out and have a good old-fashioned potluck. Featuring some of the best culinary artists in town, that is.

Eric is sweating over the 12 burners of his Imperial gas cookstove, obscured by two low-hanging pot racks laden with copper and restaurant-grade pots. He's not quite in full view of his guests at home, whereas Coyote's open kitchen spotlights the executive chef, against his backstage nature. Today his restaurant team from Coyote is milling around nearby: pastry chef Ericka Rodriguez, and her husband, Eduardo, the executive sous chef, plus Sigfredo Montalvo, Coyote's (and La Casa Sena's) sous chef. Chatting and wandering are Eric's "Santa Fe mom and dad," as he considers Dee and Bernie Rusanowski, owners of Saveur, where Bernie is one of the chefs. There's also Sara's friend from some of the 17 years she has worked at Coyote, Leslie Lujan; and the couple's good pals David and Heather Sellers, owners of Amavi, where David is executive chef.

This comfortable room seems built for a gathering like today's. Even though it's a full



Clockwise from left: Sellers's Salpicón de Mariscos, a marinated seafood salad; DiStefano's lamb, raised by Talus Wind Ranch in Galisteo; Rusanowski's "perfectly blanched asparagus," as DiStefano complimented him during the meal.



1,100 square feet of the larger residence designed by Alexander Dzurec, it is the house's heart. Black-leather-and-chrome barstools permit perching at three café tables, and various spaces like an island and another table invite eating and grazing ("We're platter people at home," says Eric). The bar is stocked. And if you're not

the cook, you can lounge on leather sofas in front of a flat-screen TV. Sliding-glass doors open to an expansive patio, and an iPod system shuffles through the decades, from the Outfield to John Mayer. "When he throws it, it's a party," says Dee.

Eric is the proverbial consummate host, even while preparing his intensive "Coyote spicy lamb racks" (hunks of meat that would make a Monty Python devotee proud) and a colorful mixed grill of chorizo that Eric made from pork, chicken, cilantro, garlic, and epazote (a Mexican herb); chicken thighs; and roasted leeks, fingerling potatoes, and red, yellow, and orange chiles, all seasoned with—can you actually measure a spice as a cup rather than a tablespoon?—Chimayó red chile powder. Through everything, not wanting to be the center of attention, Eric still needs to make sure guests are comfortable: "Cocktails?" "Do you want a martini?"

When he finds takers, he hands them over to his master mixologist. Quinn, who worked at Geronimo with Eric, has quickly found a loyal following at Coyote, where he says he creates about 100 specialty cocktails a night from a list of up to two dozen seasonal drinks, and others, including the signature Señorita margarita. Today he has concocted the Spring Fever (see the recipe on page 128) and is serving that along with some standards.

David, who has been watching Eric cook, takes space on the counter and starts



Clockwise from top left: DiStefano and Sara Chapman's daughter, Page, does a taste test of Coyote Café pastry chef Ericka Rodriguez's strawberry shortcakes, which Ericka (above) dusts with sugar. Her pièce de résistance.



to carefully place watercress leaves on a platter, then delicately top them with a marinated seafood salad. This Salpicón de Mariscos (with seven lightly poached varieties of seafood, various vegetables and herbs, and a vinaigrette of sherry and Spanish white wine vinegar, among other ingredients) had, he says, a “three- to four-week run at Amavi last August,” soon after he and Heather opened for business, and might make a repeat performance this summer. (One snitch, and it’s not hard to understand why.) At the same time, Bernie creates a Provençal field of color with his carrots Vichy, caprese salad, marinated beets, and asparagus garnished with pistachios—dishes familiar to his Saveur regulars. “I learned the technique for the carrots from the chef at the Maurice Hotel in Paris last summer,” he says.

All three chefs seem as comfortable with each other here as they are in their daily high-pressure roles. Within the past year, both David and Eric left executive-chef posts (David was at Santacafé, for ten years; Eric at Geronimo, for 11) and joined the ranks of Santa Fe’s ever-growing club of chef-owners, like Brian Knox at Aqua Santa and James Campbell Caruso at La Boca. “This is what Santa Fe needed to revitalize the dining scene,” says David. “Chef-owners try to do the best we can. Not that we didn’t before, but now we give 150 percent instead of 130 percent. The best part is we’re doing it ourselves, experimenting, and we change something if it doesn’t work.” Eric later says controlling his own destiny is most important to him; Heather adds that chef-owners want “every level of the restaurant to represent what they’re serving.”

And what they serve is becoming even more fired with personal creativity. At Coyote, for instance, Eric has left only one reminder of founder Mark Miller on the menu—the griddled corn cakes with prawns and chipotle butter—yet he tries to mesh the Southwestern ingredients made popular by Miller with his own French training and Asian cooking tendencies. Eric was also inspired to introduce family recipes of Eduardo’s, like his grandmother’s mole poblano, in the Cantina when it opened on April 15. And Ericka presents family specialties in her new dessert repertoire: “I made

the *tres leches* recipe with my mom; we made vanilla, and now I add flavors like pineapple and chocolate.” Ravés Eric about his team, “These guys have the deep, dark secrets from Mexico.”

Food is synonymous with happiness for this crowd, yet their reluctance to eat when it’s ready makes today’s meal seem almost secondary. The feast is announced, but the friends need to be coaxed into grabbing plates. Then most stand at the café tables to eat. Eric grabs a bowl and first scoops some mixed grill into it, tasting the food with gusto from behind the red-granite island, surveying the scene. Then Eric and Sara’s 6-year-old daughter, Page, flits in wearing pink chef pants and a white chef coat, and grabs a few things off platters. Eric tosses his English bulldog Joey Fernandez two lamb chops: “Poor thing. He’s just sitting there.” David and Heather give each other tastes off their forks.

Other utensils click in the suddenly quiet space whose hush signals enjoyment. “Good, Eric,” says Bernie. David seconds. The host, who marinated the main dish in extra-virgin olive oil (Albertsons brand), rice vinegar, shallots, black peppercorns, and fresh thyme, then pan-seared and oven-roasted it to a pink perfection, demurs, “I didn’t do much to that lamb at all.” Quinn’s wine pairing of a medium-body Juan Gil monastrell from Jumilla, Spain, gets sated kudos marked by empty glasses. And Ericka’s strawberry shortcake (the secret, she confides, is adding pastry cream to the whipped cream) is the perfect not-too-sweet complement to the spring feast.

Like the heaping Italian meals that Eric’s mother made for family and friends on Sunday evenings when he was growing up in Hershey, Pennsylvania, this one seems to have more than satisfied guests. Friends Eric, David, and Heather keep talking shop—from balancing work and small children to the sometimes overwhelming task of managing staff, numbers of which will soon double for high tourist season—but everyone else lounges on the patio, trying Quinn’s latest creations, or chats in clusters around the bar. Soulful Janis Joplin tunes on the iPod is the final sign that the party is mellowing. It’s been an afternoon, as M.F.K. Fisher wrote, among friends. ❀