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Santa Fe chef loves a challenge

Santa Fe, NM – Fodor's, Frommer's, New York Times -- they all love Bumble Bee's Baja Grill in New Mexico for the fresh, creative cuisine. To say nothing of the locals. The two Bumble Bee's in Santa Fe and two in Albuquerque have a loyal clientele.

Galvin is a graduate of the Culinary Institute in Hyde Park, New York, and grew up in the restaurant business. Her father owned several Manhattan restaurants where she spent her summers working. "I remember watching the people in the kitchen and thinking it was exciting and challenging, and that's what I wanted to do," Galvin says.

After culinary school, Galvin did an apprenticeship in Italy where she says she learned to make great pasta. "The Italians don't mess around," she says. "A few fresh ingredients, good olive oil, salt and pepper and serve it up."

Galvin moved to Santa Fe in 1986 to work under Mark Miller at the Coyote Café. There, she says she learned "to taste, and to balance foods."

She later worked at Café Escalera with David Tanis, chef at the esteemed Chéz Panisse in Berkely, California.

She then started her own restaurant in Santa Fe, Andiamo, which continues to be a very successful Italian restaurant. After tiring of that and selling her share of the restaurant to her partner, Galvin began to think about what she wanted to do next.

Galvin describes discovering the Rubio's and Baja Fresh concept in California and thinking that she could do it better, and no one else was doing it in Santa Fe. Bumble Bee's owner Bob Weil describes the same discovery and thinking he could do it better, and no one else was doing it Santa Fe.

"I had fish tacos on the brain when I met Bob," she says. "It was meant to be."

They make a great team, each crediting the other for making the restaurant chain the success that it is.

Galvin developed all of the recipes, and early on they set up a commissary or centralized kitchen in Albuquerque that mixes all the sauces, seasonings, salsas and salad dressings every day to keep the recipes consistent. "We have good people and we have strict quality control standards," says Galvin.

When she's not dreaming up recipes or managing five kitchens, Galvin is working out at Carl and Sandra Miller's gym in Santa Fe, training for weight-lifting competitions. She holds the world record for her age and weight division.

"I like a challenge," she says. "In work and at play."

Bumble Bee's Baja Grill specializes in food so fresh the restaurants actually have no freezers (except ice cream freezers) or microwaves. The rotisserie chicken is a house specialty and is served rich, golden brown and juicy. The guacamole -- a measure of freshness in any restaurant -- is flavored with fresh cilantro and lime and made daily. The house salad is another example of Bumble Bee's typically fresh fare -- mixed greens, jicama, avocado and cotija cheese, tomatoes and tortilla strips with a mild citrus vinaigrette.

Based on the idea of fresh, fast, healthful Mexican food and convenient, casual service, the Santa Fe based chain has won a Santa Fe Reporter's "Best" award all four years of its operation. Locations include downtown Santa Fe at 301 Jefferson, south side Santa Fe at 3777 Cerrillos Rd., Albuquerque at San Mateo and Montgomery, and Nob Hill at 3423 Central Avenue.

The Chef Q&A:

Why did you want to be a chef?

I love the restaurant business, I love to cook, I love to eat good food.

What is your cooking philosophy?

Keep it simple. Use fresh, quality ingredients. Don't be afraid to use salt.
Taste your food and tweek it until it's as good as it can be.

What is one of your favorite ingredients?

Truffle oil.

Name five items in your home refrigerator.

Tortillas, peanut butter, olives, salami, cherries.

What do you do on your days off?

Train at the gym, practice my golf game, ski, hike with my dog Sofia, do home improvement projects.

What do you like about Santa Fe?

I love the weather, the mountains, the size of the city, and all the outdoor activities that Santa Fe has to offer.

What is your most coveted piece of kitchen equipment?

At Bumblebee's -- Besco Tortilla maker, at home -- a Wolf Range.

What advice would you give future chefs?

Work under the direction of talented, professional chefs. Always give 100 percent effort and attention.