

# THE SOUL OF SANTA FE

WITH ITS BLEND OF NATIVE AMERICAN HISTORY, WILD WEST GRIT, AND COSMOPOLITAN POLISH, NEW MEXICO'S IDIOSYNCRATIC STATE CAPITAL BECKONS TO WAYFARERS AND INSPIRES THE ARTIST IN EVERYONE

By AARON GULLEY •  
PHOTOGRAPHS by JEN JUDGE



**ON THE RISE**

Looking across the Caja del Rio plateau to Tetilla Peak, southwest of town. Opposite: Rising local artist Willy Bo Richardson in his Santa Fe garage studio.





**BRICKS AND MORTAR**

Galleries and cafés occupy old adobe buildings on Palace Avenue, just east of the historic Santa Fe Plaza. Opposite: Tools of the trade for New Mexican fresco artist Frederico Vigil.





**I**

**N THE SANTA FE PLAZA,** the one-block square where New Mexico's capital sprung up some 400 years ago, I'm shuffling around the cobbled periphery looking for art. Long, low, cinnamon-colored buildings sprawl at the edges of the square like earthen caves. A few passersby lounge on benches beneath massive cottonwood trees in the grassy courtyard, while groups of local teens loiter under the *portales*—the shaded, timber post-supported arcades that front the buildings. In the gallery on the north side, along the wall of the Palace of the Governors, Native American traders huddle on brightly patterned blankets hawking silver and turquoise jewelry. Except for the storefronts full of overpriced cowboy boots and kitschy reproductions of Pueblo art, it feels like a century-old scene straight out of rural Chile or Mexico.

I've come to the plaza on this sharp, sunny autumn afternoon not just in search of a painting or a sculpture—I'm here seeking the creative essence of Santa Fe. On the face of it, this should be an easy task. "Santa Fe is the third-biggest art market in the U.S.," a chirpy young blonde tells me at the nearby Santa Fe Visitors Bureau.

"What's first and second?" I ask.

"New York by a wide margin. Then Los Angeles," she says, almost gloating.

It's formidable company for a poky backwater of 60,000. Some 240 art dealers base themselves here, and there are so many galleries on Canyon Road, a 1.2-kilometer-long wooded lane on the east side of town, that over the years the art shops have spilled into surrounding neighborhoods and the city center. From where I stand on the plaza, I can see the Shiprock Gallery, the Santa Fe Indian Trading Company, the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, and the New Mexico Museum of Art, which, I note, is currently draped in an oversize banner for a show entitled "It's About Time: 14,000 Years of Art in New Mexico." And Santa Fe has more than just galleries. The Santa Fe Opera House can keep up with Vienna; the ornate Spanish Renaissance-style Lensic Theater features on the national lecture circuit; and when it comes to food, the local restaurant scene would make a city 10 times Santa Fe's size blush.

"We maybe don't have the world's best of

anything," says a local painter friend of mine who moved back to Santa Fe from New York a few years ago. "But it's all really good. We're talking about a cultural destination and global icon in a small town. Where else does that exist?"

Nearly eight years have passed since I moved to Santa Fe, and though I've grown to appreciate the chilies in the food and the lackadaisical pace of life and the flat-roofed, monotone architecture that define the place, I still find this art phenomenon mysterious. What makes a town as obscure as the capital of New Mexico a creative powerhouse? And why do artists continue to gather here? My quest is personal, too, because as a travel writer I tend to be more engaged with the places I visit for work than with my adopted hometown. That would be okay if I lived in Toledo or Des Moines. But with Santa Fe, it feels something like living in Tahiti and vacationing in the Maldives. So I'm also after some homegrown inspiration.

I wander a block west of the plaza to the "14,000 Years" exhibition, which offers some clues about the city's draw. Situated at the end of both the Camino Real de Tierra Adentro (a historic trade route that stretched to Mexico City) and the 19th-century Santa Fe Trail (connecting New Mexico with Missouri), Santa Fe has beckoned for centuries to entrepreneurs, wayfarers, and free spirits. Artists first began flocking to the region from the East Coast in the 1880s to document Native American culture, which many feared would be lost. A second wave of photographers and painters, including the American modernist Georgia O'Keefe, descended after the turn of the 20th century, drawn by the patchwork of cultural influences, the expansive beauty of the sage-fringed high desert, and the escape from the didacticism of formal art scenes.

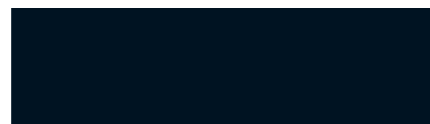
The broad stroke of the exhibition is that New Mexican art is born from the migration of ideas and aesthetics. In the most simplistic view, Santa Fe is what it is because it's a crossroads. But why, I wonder as I leave the museum and walk back across the plaza, do so many people—myself included—come to Santa Fe in the first place?

I DECIDE I NEED TO POSE THIS QUESTION TO LOCAL artists, and after a couple of quick phone calls I have a pad-full of contacts. I ring Emily Henry, an interior designer, artist, and furniture-maker that a good friend describes as "the quintessential Santa Fe eccentric." I meet her for coffee at her cozy downtown office space, a mod glass-and-steel interior that looks out onto a leafy courtyard. When I arrive, Henry is at her drafting table amid stacks of sketches for a new furniture design she's been penciling all morning.

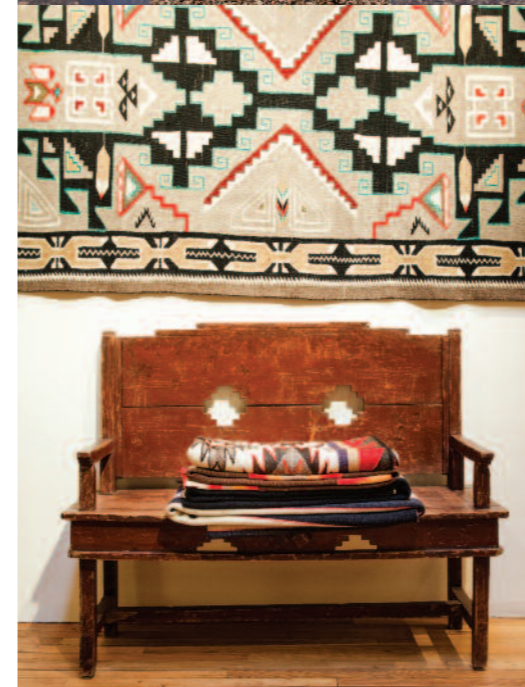
Henry, 43, tells me that her great uncle Gene moved to nearby Taos in the 1920s to escape the monotony of his life in Kansas, and that her parents followed in the early '60s when they left Wisconsin. "The history of Anglos coming here is to find themselves," she tells me. "People go to New Mexico to get away from it all. It's a place where you don't have to live by anyone else's rules."

Henry grew up in a Taos commune among art luminaries such

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SUMMER, AND SLEEP  
IN BLESSED SILENCE.  
THIS LAND IS AN  
INSPIRING MUSE**



**SANTA FE STYLE**  
Clockwise from far left: Chilies are an essential ingredient in Santa Fe cooking; vigas (wooden beams) adorn many Southwestern-style buildings; boots galore at a downtown consignment store Double Take; the stables at Bishop's Lodge Ranch Resort, a historic retreat in the Tesuque Valley; house specialties at a Santa Fe burrito joint; Navajo textiles on display at a Canyon Road gallery; the massage teepee at Bishop's Lodge.





**NATURALLY GIFTED**

A "passive house" in the Santa Fe suburbs represents a modern, energy-efficient take on Santa Fe-style architecture. Opposite: Furniture-maker Emily Henry amid design sketches at her downtown office.





**BEST OF THE SOUTHWEST**

Clockwise from right: A view over town; an outdoor sculpture in the Railyard art district; Joseph Wrede at Tomme, the chef's latest restaurant venture; Wrede's duck à l'orange; taking in an exhibition at the David Richard Gallery, one of Santa Fe's numerous art spaces; adobe architecture at the New Mexico Museum of Art; a work by Peruvian artist Aldo Chaparro at James Kelly Contemporary.



as Dennis Hopper and Kenny Bell. "We lived in the house that Mabel Dodge Luhan built for D.H. Lawrence," she says casually, as if everyone might have had this experience. She later moved to Pittsburgh where she worked at the Carnegie Museum of Art, but not for long. "The East Coast and me were like oil and water," she says. "Once New Mexico digs into you, it's hard to get out of here, to shake off the beauty. You know—the landscape, the air, the smell of chamisa after the rain." I understand perfectly: unlike in New York, which is really where a journalist should live, here in Santa Fe I can stroll cactus-lined trails at dusk, breathe in burning-dry sunshine at my patio office in summer, and, except for the reassuring growl of thunder or the eerie laughter of coyotes, sleep in blessed silence. This land is an inspiring muse.

The environment plays heavily into Henry's furniture, a line of poplar and pine credenzas and side tables that are hand-carved with stylized local motifs: wild plum blossoms, cactus pads, and pigeons on a wire that Henry—with a little shuffle resembling a Native American tribal dance—refers to as Navajo birds. Named Millicent after the idiosyncratic 1930s socialite Millicent Rogers, who moved from New York City to Taos and became a champion for Southwestern art, the line is also infused with New Mexican history. Henry pulls down books filled with faded color photos of wood chests and doors by Nicolai Fechin, a Russian artist who immigrated to New Mexico in 1923 and became famous for his carving. The style proved so popular that it inspired a movement during the New Deal era, with artisans paid by the Works Progress Administration to produce etched furniture. Henry's pieces have the same rough-hewn character as WPA furniture, but her designs are modern, the carvings delicate and refined, and the wood inlaid with hammered brass. "It's the culmination of my knowledge and history with this place," she says. "I'm learning to take this tradition and update it, expand on it. The challenge is to create something that is very Santa Fe without being Southwestern."

This idea of renewal reminds me of a friend, architect Jonah Stanford, and after I've left Henry's I ring him up and make dinner plans. Santa Fe's most distinctive characteristic is its architecture. By law, buildings in the city must adhere to a strict code that includes, among other things, flat roofs, low one- to two-story profiles, adobe construction (though most new buildings are "faux-dobe" frame structures shaped and plastered to look the part), and earth-tone exteriors. It's the basis for a whole architectural movement known as the Santa Fe style.

"I don't necessarily subscribe to the history or the administration of it," Stanford says that night over dinner at his home in the lower Railyard neighborhood. "But it's true that the style has given Santa Fe a strong sense of place." He tells me that though many visitors believe the squat, mud-brick look of town harkens back to the Spanish or even to the Pueblo Indians who first inhabited the region a millennium ago, the architecture and town layout, including some of the circuitous road design, date to 1912. That's when New Mexico was granted statehood, becoming the 47th state in the union, at which point Santa Fe city plan-

**COCOA-BROWN HILLS STIPPLED BY PIÑON TREES LOOM EAST OF TOWN, WHILE TO THE WEST THE DESERT ROLLS OFF AS FAR AS YOU CAN SEE. THE LANDSCAPE IS SUBLIME, BUT IT'S THE EMPTINESS THAT'S TRULY AFFECTING**

Richard, the internationally renowned SITE Santa Fe—crouch around the northeastern train terminus, the same rail line that put the city on the national map in the mid-1800s. And downtown, the Museum of Contemporary Native American Arts sits in a traditional wood-beam adobe structure facing the stolid, Romanesque St. Francis Cathedral—begging the question of conquered and conqueror. It's not only the influx of people that fuel Santa Fe's creative side, it's also the cultural, political, and artistic collisions that have resulted.

"Santa Fe encompasses that 'Go West' American spirit," Stanford says. "It has always been about revival and innovation."

EVEN SWINE CAN BE ART IN SANTA FE. "I DON'T NECESSARILY want to make hamburgers or French dip all the time," says Joseph Wrede, one of the most decorated chefs in New Mexico. "I want to say, 'How do you fix a pig's ear? How do you make it flavor-forward and delicious and really persuade people to want to eat it? How do you make art out of a pig's ear?'"

Wrede, who made his name in the 1990s at his acclaimed Joseph's Table in Taos, is talking to me one block from the Santa Fe Plaza at his latest restaurant venture, a corner café called Tomme that he took over three months ago. From the outside, the place looks like it might once have been a gas station. Inside, however, it's done up in rich slates and toffees with filtered sunlight spilling through massive paned windows onto sumptuous abstract oil paintings. Funky at first glance but a stunning mix of self-assured hominess and sophistication once you get to know it, the restaurant is a lot like Santa Fe itself.

It's hard to talk about "creative" Santa Fe without talking about its food. New Mexico has a rich culinary tradition steeped in its land (think corn and lamb). As with the culture, there are strong influences from across the southern border, with poverty-style stews and tortillas and classics like enchiladas and *chile rellenos*. The biggest difference between Mexican cuisine and Santa Fe-style cooking, however, is the two distinctive chili-pepper sauces, made from either fresh sweet green varieties or snappy, dried red ones. If there were a state quote, it would surely be the question posed by every waiter

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in every single New Mexican restaurant every day of the year: “Red, green, or Christmas?”

“That’s the great thing about cooking here: the idea that your dish could be spicy. Anywhere else, that would be shocking, even in New York City,” Wrede says. Expectations are different here. People want spice. They come seeking variety. “There are less limitations as I approach my cooking, and that frees me up to branch out, to explore. I have more room to manipulate ideas and find my own voice and flavors.”

Wrede has done that with dishes such as his duck à l’orange, which he hints could incorporate the suggestion of green chilies. And he glazes the leg of lamb with local apples and plates the dish with indigenous dried corn called *chicos*. The flavors in each dish are as strong and subtle as a Rothko painting, yet the presentations are as bold and sculptural as a Miró. It’s veritable art for the palate. “There are a hell of a lot of people making art here, living in the arts,” he says, and it’s clear he’s not just talking about painters. “Santa Fe is all about the unconventional.”

Wrede’s expansiveness has me thinking about how the lack of expectations here has allowed me to develop my own voice. It also has me ready to try the pig’s ear, but it’s not yet on the menu. I promise to come back when it is. I almost feel like it’s my duty as a Santa Fean.

ONE THING ABOUT SANTA FE THAT can’t be overstated is its intimacy. Despite having the international reputation and influence of a much larger city, it’s a place where you can’t go out for dinner without bumping into someone you know.

At least, that’s the feeling I had as I left the Museum of Art a few days earlier and passed a fresco in the courtyard by Frederico Vigil, who has been called the Michelangelo of New Mexico. I met Vigil a year ago in Albuquerque, New Mexico’s largest city, where the 66-year-old was finishing a decade-long fresco project that fills the inside of a 14-meter-tall

## SANTA FE

tower at the National Hispanic Cultural Center. I call him to chat, and he’s quick to credit his birthplace, Santa Fe, for his success. “If the Santa Fe Council for the Arts hadn’t given me a fellowship,” he says, “I never would have made frescoes.” That includes a dozen wall-size works across Santa Fe, including the one in the museum, titled *Exodus*, which depicts a wave of Spanish immigrants pouring toward two Native Americans surrounded by signs of New World bounty: pumpkins, maize, beehive ovens. “You start with two cultures and eventually end with a blend of both,” curator Ellen Zieselmann says of the work.

Notwithstanding food and architecture—and even writing—there’s an undeniable romance and import to painting, which is why I take a friend’s advice and contact Willy Bo Richardson, a rising star in contemporary art. “Come over to the studio and we can talk,” he replies when I e-mail him. Unlike New York, in Santa Fe there is a generosity of space and time.

Richardson, 38, lives in a diminutive adobe with his wife, Kim, and five-year-old-daughter, Audrey, and he paints in a bright, cramped attached garage that he’s converted to a studio. Though he’s shown in galleries from New York to London and sells paintings for more than most people spend on a car, Richardson is boyish, friendly, demure. His biography is startlingly similar to Emily Henry’s: his parents moved to New Mexico in the ’60s and raised him on a commune; he moved to the East Coast to make his name (New York in this case), but returned to Santa Fe because he simply couldn’t stay away.

“People come here for the light and the space. It’s a good place to work out ideas and to think,” he says when we meet. He tells me that he couldn’t produce the works he does if he didn’t live in New Mexico. “Coming from New York, you fill yourself up with information. This is a good place to actually look at that information and let it settle in.”

It’s a side of Santa Fe that I take for granted. Cocoa-brown hills stippled by dark-green piñon trees loom east of town, while to the west scraggly empty desert rolls off as far as you can see. The landscape is sublime, but it’s the emptiness that’s truly affecting. The forever-blue emerald sky is so wide and open that sometimes it feels like it could swallow you. On nights that I write into the silent hours, when I’m at a loss for words, just walking out into the desert and sitting a while beneath the stars can free up my mind and help me find my voice. It seems like a small thing—but I realize now how powerful this place can be. Richardson

adds, “You can’t live here without grappling with this incredible, vast expanse.”

Richardson paints wall-size canvases in fluid, vertical strokes of bold color. He shows me an orange and blue diptych, and you can feel Santa Fe’s spaciousness in the movement of the paint as well as the town’s struggling influences and incongruities in the contrasting tones. The painting, one in a series called *Music To Drive To*, is nothing like Vigil’s *Exodus*. And yet the two live side-by-side and somehow manage to blend under the wide umbrella of a Santa Fe art.

Lately, Richardson tells me, in addition to painting he’s been teaching at Santa Fe University of Art and Design. “I have a student, a 60-year-old man. He’s a Hopi,” Richardson says. The idea of a young, Anglo, contemporary painter instructing an older Native American in abstract art strikes me as a juxtaposition fit for Santa Fe. Richardson continues, “At one point he was making his art, and his gallery stopped him and said, ‘No, we

like the buffalos and the eagles.’ He could sell a painting for US\$400 because it has a buffalo on it, but I say screw that. I told him to learn the real story and sell it for a couple thousand.”

A thousand years after people first inhabited the town site, four hundred years after it was founded, and one hundred years after the decision was made to market its cultural heritage, Santa Fe continues to evolve and continues to grapple with what’s true. It’s impossible to say for sure, though I feel a little more certain when I wake at dawn a few mornings after visiting Richardson. As the black horizon line of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains to the east sharpens with the approaching sun, ribbons of cloud glow pumpkin and coral and tangerine against strips of indigo and periwinkle sky—just like Richardson’s canvas. The color and intensity is something I’d have sworn couldn’t exist in nature, and yet here it is. And my first instinct, the only thing I can think about doing, is to sit down and write. ☺



### THE DETAILS SEEKING SANTA FE

#### —GETTING THERE

The main airport in Albuquerque, an hour’s drive away, is connected to major American hubs such as Denver, Chicago, and Los Angeles.

#### —WHERE TO STAY

Southwestern-style furnishings, local artwork, and Pueblo-inspired architecture are hallmarks of the charming **La Posada de Santa Fe Resort** (330 East Palace Ave.; 1-855/278-5276; laposadadesantafe.com; doubles from US\$169), set in a leafy compound in the

center of town. More intimate still is the **Inn of the Anasazi** (113 Washington Ave.; 1-505/988-3030; rosewoodhotels.com; doubles from US\$285), with just 58 rooms outfitted with kiva fireplaces and Navajo rugs. Those looking for a more expansive setting should book one of the airy villa-style casitas at the **Four Seasons Resort Rancho Encantado** (198 State Road 592; 1-505/946-5700; fourseasons.com; doubles from US\$350). Located on a 23-hectare estate in the foothills north of town, the recently rebranded

property offers a pared-down Southwest style and Native American-inspired spa treatments.

#### —WHERE TO EAT

Set in the Historic Borrego House amid the galleries of Canyon Road, fine-dining stalwart **Geronimo** (724 Canyon Rd.; 1-505/982-1500) puts a Southwestern spin on global cuisine; try the signature elk tenderloin. Closer to the center of town, head to **Tomme** (229 Galisteo St.; 1-505/820-2253) for a taste of chef Joseph Wrede’s celebrated cooking, or to the cozy adobe building inhabited by **Azur** (428 Agua Fria St.; 1-505/992-2897) for tapas and other Mediterranean dishes. Just a block from the Plaza, Mexican folk art meets Southwestern and Nuevo Latino specialties at **Café Pasqual’s** (121 Don Gaspar Ave.; 1-505/983-9340), a cheerful haunt.

#### —WHAT TO SEE

Santa has no lack of world-class museums, with highlights including the **Museum of Contemporary Native**

**Arts** (108 Cathedral Pl.; 1-888/922-4242; iaia.edu/museum), the **New Mexico Museum of Art** (107 West Palace Ave.; 1-505/476-5072; nmart.museum.org), and the **Georgia O’Keeffe Museum** (217 Johnson St.; 1-505/946-1000; okeeffemuseum.org), which showcases works by one of Santa Fe’s most famous artists and her contemporaries.

For operabuffs, the **Santa Fe Opera** (301 Opera Dr.; 1-505/986-5900; santafeopera.org) presents consistently remarkable performances during its June–August season.

Visitors also have their choice of art galleries; start in the Railyard area, home to **James Kelly Contemporary** (550 South Guadalupe St.; 1-505/989-1601; jameskelly.com), the **David Richard Gallery** (544 South Guadalupe St.; 1-855/983-9555; davidrichardgallery.com), and **SITE Santa Fe** (1606 Paseo de Peralta; 1-505/989-1199; sitesantafe.org), among others.