Reviewing the Flavor of the Old West

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Reviving the Flavor Of the Old West: COOKS ON THE MAP This Month: Sam ...
By NANCY HARMON JENKINS
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Reviving the Flavor Of the Old West

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COOKS ON THE MAP

This Month: Sam Arnold, Denver

DENVER

SAM ARNOLD has been known to open champagne bottles by slashing off their necks off with a tomahawk. Such Wild West tactics are fairly typical for this mild-mannered, soft-voiced historian, radio commentator, food writer and restaurateur. He runs a popular restaurant, the Fort, an adobe reconstruction of a historic Southwestern trading post, in the foothills a few miles outside this city.

Mr. Arnold, 63 years old, grew up back where the cement grows, in the relative gentility of Pittsburgh, and was schooled at Andover and Yale. He may seem an unlikely choice for the role of mountain man, trailblazer, half-civilized cowboy and trader with the Indians.

But in his fringed leather jacket, he fulfills the longings of small boys — and grown men — all over the country to live life as it once was lived, in the legendary dreamtime of the Old West. In his 40 years in Denver, he has become an enthusiastic scholar of the foods of that period. The West was a crisscross map of cultures, from the Hispanic and Indian natives to the Santa Fe Trail drovers, migrants in wagon trains struggling out to the Oregon Territory, and voyageurs paddling down from North Country rivers and lakes.

The food that Mr. Arnold cooks, whether in his restaurant or in the well-stocked kitchen of the house he shares with his wife, Carrie, an accomplished painter and horsewoman, is likely to be a refinement of the simpler tastes of those times but heightened with robust flavors. He uses ingredients like pungent New Mexican chili peppers (either freshly roasted or dried and crushed), ground black Talicherry peppercorns, and fragrant Mexican or Greek oregano.

At the restaurant Mr. Arnold serves buffalo steak, buffalo tongue, buffalo sausages and grilled buffalo bones. The recipes for the sausages and the bones were researched in the Denver Public Library's magnificent

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Western History Collection. The grilled bones are cracked and the marrow is extracted for a toast spread called prairie butter. The Fort served two tons of bones last year. The buffalo comes from ranches in Wyoming and Colorado.

Buffalo was always a part of the diet of mountain men, as the trappers and guides of the Rocky Mountains were called in the early 19th century. It is low in cholesterol, saturated fat and calories. A 100-gram serving of cooked buffalo has 2.42 grams of fat, 87 milligrams of cholesterol and 143 calories, according to the United States Department of Agriculture.

Mr. Arnold has been watching his cholesterol count since undergoing triple-bypass surgery nearly two years ago. He trims the fat off steak, uses monounsaturated canola oil in most of his recipes, and increases herb flavorings to cut salt.

With these health measures, Mr. Arnold feels he can indulge on rare occasions in the chocolate chili cake that he developed from a recipe given him by the Southwestern food writer Jane Butel. The cake, which is served at the restaurant for birthdays and anniversaries, is a startling combination of sweet and peppery. But after all, as he points out, the Spanish, and the Aztecs before them, often took chili with their chocolate.

"Everybody should have a bypass, whether they need it or not," Mr. Arnold joked one recent morning as he prepared Gonzalez steak, stuffed with green chilis, and a soup he calls "the bowl of the wife of Kit Carson." Actually, he said, the soup is more widely known as caldo tlalpeño, but the name he calls it is rooted in family history.

"We found it literally by accident in Mexico many years ago when my daughter, Holly, was little," he recalled. "We had a car accident and she cut her hand, and the surgeon who stitched her up sent us to eat caldo tlalpeño at the lunch counter of a drugstore in Durango. We put it on the menu at the Fort, but no one could pronounce the name. But there was an old lady, Miss Leona Wood, who was actually Kit Carson's own last living grandchild, who worked for us on Sundays, and she said, 'Oh, I remember that dish. My grandmother used to serve that.' So we renamed it. And it's been on the menu ever since."

Gonzalez steak resulted from an April Fool's joke when Elidio Gonzalez, a master wood carver from Taos, N.M., was visiting the restaurant to demonstrate his skills. Mr. Gonzalez was scornful of bland gringo food like meat and potatoes, so Mr. Arnold buried hot chilies in the steak. When Mr. Gonzalez cut into the steak, Mr. Arnold recalled, he said: "The joke's on you, gringo! This is really good! Put it on the menu."

Even the Fort, Mr. Arnold's restaurant, came about somewhat by accident. It was inspired by a picture of Bent's Fort, an adobe trading post built in 1834 on the north bank of the Arkansas River in southern Colorado, then the border between the United States and Mexico, as an outpost of the trading empire of the brothers William and Charles Bent. It was "an intriguing-looking place," Mr. Arnold said, "a mud castle with big towers.

"My wife said, 'How'd you like to live in a castle like that?' " he said. "And I said, 'I'd love to. Let's build it.' And we did."

When Denver bankers raised their eyebrows at financing his dream castle, Mr. Arnold turned the ground floor into a restaurant to pay his mortgage, and he hired a chef. "I'd always had considerable interest in food," he said. "I went to Andover at the age of 16 with a Sterno stove and a frying pan. I used to make fried egg sandwiches for the guys on my floor."

Running a restaurant wasn't too different, he implied. He admitted to a moment of truth on Thanksgiving Day in 1963 when the chef ran out of food in the first two hours. "We had 300 people pounding on their tables," he said, "and no turkey, no stuffing."

After that experience, Mr. Arnold went into the kitchen himself, determined never to be caught short again. Meanwhile, he took cooking lessons whenever and wherever he could, as far away as La Varenne in Paris and a school in Colombo, Sri Lanka. He also has done graduate work in Western history, specializing in food, at the University of Denver, and this fall the University Press of Colorado is to publish his book, "Eating Up the Santa Fe Trail."

To help his guests work up an appetite as he prepared a meal at home, Mr. Arnold served hailstorms, which he says were the first mixed drinks in Colorado, served at Bent's Fort in the 1830's. The drink, a primitive mint julep, is mixed in a Mason jar, traditionally with ice from the ice house, yerba buena (wild mint) from the mountains, sugar and a whisky called Taos Lightning, similiar to the whisky made from wheat in the 1830's.

"You shake it 50 times, chanting if you want to, and then serve it in the jar," Mr. Arnold said. "They were called hailstones in Virginia. They were common in the early part of the 19th century. I've got three or four recipes for them."

The cocktail provokes him, typically, to a historical digression about alcohol production and a man named Pegleg Smith, who in 1832 set up a distillery in Taos, then part of Mexico, to escape United States restrictions. The whisky, which was clear and presumably tasteless, had boiled tobacco, boiled red peppers or gunpowder added to give it flavor. Nowadays he uses bourbon instead.

"We still serve that at the Fort, and we haven't lost anyone yet," he said. He added hastily: "It's old-fashioned gunpowder, made with nitrate, sulphur and charcoal. The natural kind."

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Sam Arnold with Gonzalez steak outside the Fort, his adobe reconstruction of a Western trading post, outside of Denver.