

CLOSE TO HOME

# 'Greetings to the sky'

Columnist David Campiche explores the arid environment of New Mexico

This land was their land: Navajo, Ute and Hopi. The fierce Comanche marauded here, and the Apache, nomads of the Southwest. Back then, Native Americans claimed the high plateaus and deep valleys as their home. Pale-faced interlopers usurped it, sent Geronimo and the few surviving families by way of iron wheels cross-country to Florida where many slowly perished. Dreams were shattered for many generations.

These first people disclaimed ownership of this land of piñon, juniper and sagebrush. The concept of real estate just wasn't a part of their culture. Here, the Great Spirit provided. This land was His land, a gift to all. This land is high and arid, but you would never say desolate.

"Sagebrush flats are like an old-growth forest of the high mesa. Never been touched." These words were shared by an old potter friend, Russ Coburn. Anasazi pottery shards litter this corner of the West. Russ has found hundreds.

Obsessed with desert colors — orange, yellow, tan and terra cotta — Georgia O'Keeffe painted both the vast and small spectrum, and she made the small spectrum vast. She painted this large sprawling state, New Mexico. She praised the naked blue sky, the cotton-faced clouds. She loved the human-like curves that curl down the mountain sides and shape deep canyons and water-carved arroyos, a landscape swollen like taut desert skin.

My wife, Laurie, and I arrive from our Columbia-Pacific homeland. Breathe in the warm dry heat of the high plateau. Squint through water-logged eyebrows as the New Mexico sun glares down on our pale skin. We are tourists. This land is their land.

With so much to explore, we purchase two seats on a shuttle bus from Albuquerque to Santa Fe, a city of 50,000. Our destination greets us like a warm handshake. Dry and high above 7,100 feet, this historic trading post remains clean, comfortable and charming, colored like pastel crayons crowded into a paint box.

A cornucopia of art galleries housed in new and refurbished adobe buildings splays up and down narrow quiet streets, one of the largest concentrations of art galleries in America. Fine restaurants are commonplace. Southwest food delights as it burns. This is a land of peppers and chilies: chipotle, mole, pasilla negro — red, yellow, green and pungent with spicy flavor. They hang from the eaves of buildings everywhere and add to the rich local color.

Early spring and it's raining at home, in Astoria



High desert sage blankets the ground for miles as far as the eye can see outside Santa Fe, New Mexico.



Intricately incised, hand-built red clay pottery defies the imagination for its precision.

Photos by Laurie Anderson

or Long Beach, in our lush green homeland. Indomitable ocean waves break, roar, and then purr. The landscape is greening up. Salmon berry shrubs are blossoming, opening their palms like a slow-motion prayer.

Sea level is at our feet. The climate is temperate. One wonders if O'Keeffe would have been impressed! I suspect so. After all, it was O'Keeffe who said, "Give my greetings to the sky and the mountains and the sun and the winds." Doesn't that say it all?

Long before the word was nurtured, this woman was considered an unconfirmed feminist. As an artist, she led the way to a modern revolution in painting. As an undefined pantheist, O'Keeffe found her devotion in the wide open spaces of the Southwest landscape. A world-class museum of her work is located in Santa Fe.

Another pathfinder, James Beard, defined American cuisine, proclaimed its distinctions. He insisted that indigenous foods stand up tall and be praised. One of his favorite destinations was the Pacific Northwest. He loved the indigenous cuisine, its regional glory. He also loved Southwest food.

At Pasqual's in Santa Fe, we devoured fresh corn cakes accompanied by divine chili de árbol salsa. We gorged on carne asada pork wrapped in banana leaves. Homemade sauces and dressings spoke in a Southwest dialect that teased and thrilled the palate. Dessert of coffee ice cream with espresso, shaved chocolate, cocoa nibs and Chantilly cream finished the repast. Need I say more?

But there was more. One of our favorite meals in years blossomed from the dedicated chefs at the Coyote Café on Water Street. The maître d' could offer a

My wife, Laurie, and I arrive from our Columbia-Pacific homeland. Breathe in the warm dry heat of the high plateau. Squint through water-logged eyebrows as the New Mexico sun glares down on our pale skin. We are tourists.

course in professionalism and amicability to most servers across America. Passionately put, the meal and hospitality resonated like John Coltrane's "A Love Supreme." And there was still more.

To a large degree, Pacific Northwest cuisine has become a fusion of varied cultures, each featuring

subtle but explicit contributions. We borrow from many rich cultures. In that regard, the Southwest is not much different.

Of course, we didn't see oysters in New Mexico. We didn't find wild mushrooms scattered in a spicy risotto adaptation, a merger really, of three cultures. And there were no huckleberries, no fiddlehead ferns or watercress. The Southwest is corn land. Ancient ingredients permeate recipes. And they should. Corn and beans and squash have been staples here for eons.

I bought an antique silver bracelet with green-turquoise stones. I placed it on my right wrist. On the left remained an old friend: a Haida bracelet carved with symbols of killer whales. Native people of these two distinct lands offer art that speaks to legend, to spirit, and to myths. And maybe to a bit of magic. Both cultures revere their ancestors. The dead speak to them as if they were alive and retired to the next room.

An undefinable presence permeates these two landscapes and strokes our souls. Pride in landscape crosses all cultural barriers. This land is our land. This land is yours. "Meta Cuya Oyasín," say the Sioux in greeting and invitation. We are one people. Visit the Southwest and regale. Return home and embrace old friends: ocean and river, pristine sandy beaches, snowcapped mountains and lush forests.

Praise be.

Adobe architecture strikes an imposing contrast to the blue skies of Santa Fe, New Mexico.

# Coastal Life

Story by DAVID CAMPICHE