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Food from the farm

New cafe's menu will focus on locally farmed ingredients



Photo by: KAREN BRUCOLI ANESI/Special to the Herald
Linley Dixon of Adobe House Farm tends her garden in her solar greenhouse.

By Karen Brucoli Anesi
Special to the Herald

Cocina Linda, Durango's little tamale palace at the edge of Albertsons parking lot, has had a couple of face-lifts in its 10-year history. Now it has signed on for a heart transplant.

Founder, chef and chief bottle washer Linda Illsley, for whom the restaurant is named, has thrown down the gauntlet. She says it's high time farmers lead the charge in changing consumer dining habits, one bite at a time. In a few short weeks, Cocina Linda will emerge as Linda's Local Food Café, a venue where that transformation can actually happen, Illsley says.

Still quality Mexican food?

Si.

"We'll retain its Mexican roots because I can't help myself, but we'll be what the farmers need us to be," Illsley told a small crowd gathered June 8 for the Durango Harvest Dinner, a four-course, \$45-per-person menu created by food activist, filmmaker and cook Daniel Klein.

Klein was in Durango filming a segment for his online documentary series, “The Perennial Plate” and created the meal at Cocina Linda using produce donated by and purchased from 17 local farms. He also hosted a cooking demonstration the next day at Durango Natural Foods.

To support local farmers, Illsley is committed to buying whatever they grow – whether it’s a ton of pumpkins or the 150 pounds of zucchini one farmer was forced to throw away because there were no buyers.

“When I heard that story, I was just speechless,” she said. “I come from a Third World country, where we waste nothing.”

Illsley says the challenge is finding a way to “create enough capital when the harvest comes in,” so she can prepare and store the excess product and showcase it year-round, whenever she can.

The Harvest Dinner offered a glimpse of how Illsley’s farmer-driven menu will work. Pumpkin that was harvested, pureed and frozen last fall was featured in a delicious dessert tamale, paired with peach sorbet and rhubarb sauce.

Having a local-only menu is a big leap, even though Cocina Linda already is committed to the sustainability scene. The restaurant uses USDA certified organic eggs from Cole Ranch and local chickens and meats from James Ranch and Berto Farms. Illsley will continue to get her organic corn from a Texas farmer who provides her with a quality product she’s not able to buy in Colorado, but that’s one of the very few products she’s forced to have shipped, she said.

The 47-year-old Illsley is no stranger to taking bold leaps. She started Cocina Linda after selling 75 tamales one Saturday morning at the Durango Farmers Market. Initially, she cooked in a temporary structure that allowed her to operate seasonally. As her business grew, Illsley replaced it with a permanent restaurant, equipped with indoor and outdoor seating and a kitchen she “loans” to newcomers such as scientist-turned-farmer Linley Dixon of Adobe House Farm.

Illsley met Dixon in October 2010 at the Durango Farmers Market, where Dixon was selling cider and fresh-picked apples from a neighbor’s small orchard. Just a few months earlier, Dixon had left her job in Washington, D.C., where she identified plant diseases for a division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, to build a farm in Durango, where her parents, Jan and Ken Smith, have a home.

When Dixon needed a commercial kitchen in which to prepare the value-added products she makes from her crops, Illsley stepped up to the plate and offered her the use of Cocina Linda’s kitchen.

A year later, Dixon is a Saturday morning fixture at the Farmers Market, selling produce from her farm and products such as a refreshing rosemary limeade prepared in Illsley's kitchen.

"Her generosity has made it work," Dixon said.

Illsley predicts there may be raised eyebrows at the cost she must charge for quality food she'll offer, but small, organic family farms face higher labor costs than mass-quantity, high-production commercial farms which use chemicals to boost yields, she said.

"We've been taught that food should be cheap, so we do not value it," she said.

"For every dollar Americans make, they spend 10 cents on food, compared to the 30 cents Europeans might spend," she offers as an example.

"Our mentality has been to devalue the product in its raw state and devalue the act of cooking. If people eat food that is real, instead of cheap, they'll feel better afterward and know that it is worth every penny."

Attitudes can change over time, Illsley says, recalling the time she enticed young children to try a new vegetable by offering them Candy Cane-variety beets.

Even tamales made with goat meat from Fox Fire Farms were a hit, despite her customers' initial unfamiliarity with eating goats.

In Mexico, "we eat everything that moves," she said of goat meat's popularity in her native land.

Illsley's passion is two-fold – to broaden the palate of diners who have never tasted fresh, locally grown produce and to support local farmers in their need to make a profit and avoid the waste that can occur at peak harvest if supply exceeds demand.

"A freshly picked carrot might cost three times what you might pay in a grocery store, but you get so much nutritional value. It will take time, but people will recognize the difference because they'll be eating food that is nutritionally rich, rather than stale," she said.

"If this doesn't work, I'm done," Illsley says of her new venture and her last 10 years in the restaurant business. "I'll just find another way of introducing good food to people."



Photo by: KAREN BRUCOLI ANESI/Special to the Herald
Linley Dixon of Adobe House Farm shows an Italian variety of heirloom radishes she is growing in her solar greenhouse.



Photo by: STEVE LEWIS/Herald
The Perennial Plate host Daniel Klein, a chef from Minneapolis, Minn., pours mixed, wild greens into a salad during a cooking demonstration on Thursday afternoon at Durango Natural Foods.



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The Perennial Plate host Daniel Klein, left, a chef from Minneapolis, Minn., talks to a small group of people while blending rhubarb and honey into a dressing for a salad made of wild edibles and local produce while Mirra Fine, right, records the session for Klein's blog on Thursday afternoon at Durango Natural Foods. Klein said the two are one month into a six-month tour giving cooking lessons and sampling local foods from around the country.



Photo by: KAREN BRUCOLI ANESI/Special to the Herald

Linda Illsley is filmed at Cocina Linda by videographer Mirra Fine for a Durango episode of the online series "The Perennial Plate."