



Farmworker, Marie Campos and Juan Ramón Trujillo in the field.

Farming Chimayó Chile: Cultivating Faith

STORY AND PHOTOS BY GIGI RAGLAND

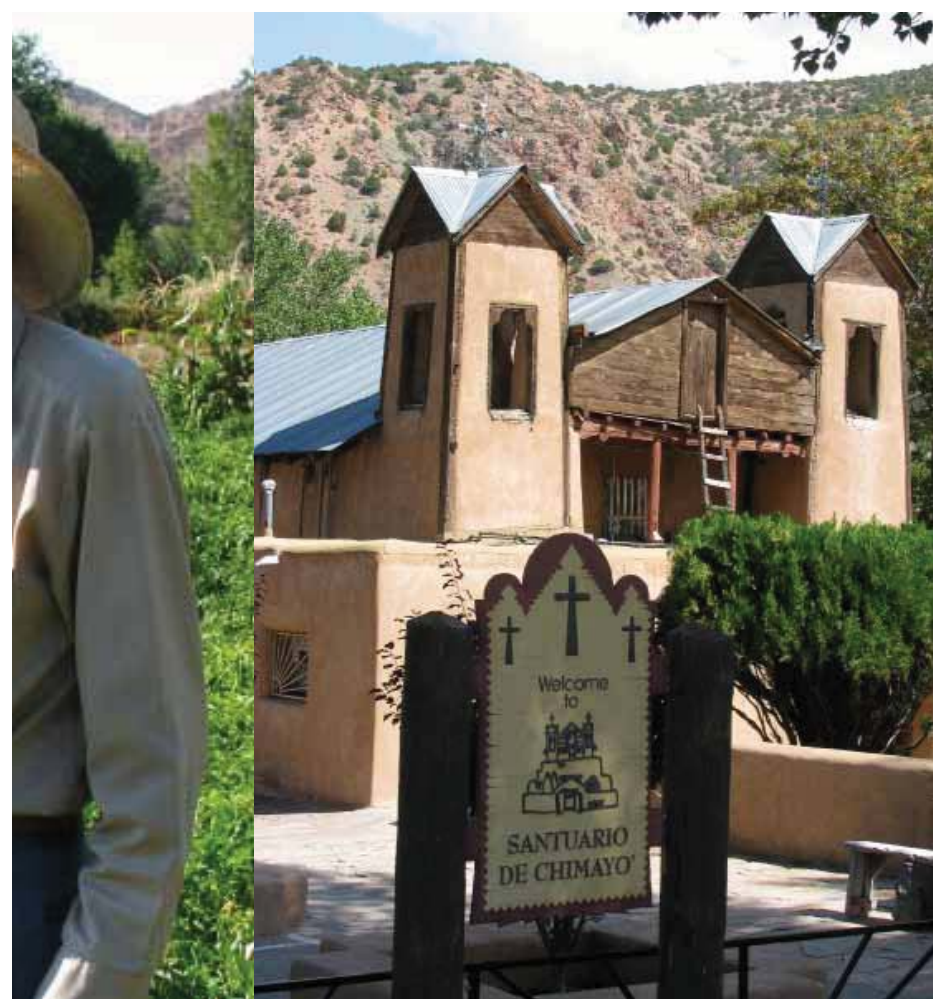
Two types of pilgrims travel along the winding and scenic “High Road” into the picturesque Chimayó. Both are in search of the divine. They seek what one might call a “religious experience,” however the motivation driving each traveler’s pilgrimage is quite different, a sacred versus secular calling leading to the charming Chimayo.

For over a century, pious believers trekked to El Santuario de Chimayo seeking holy healing and mercy from health problems. Their journey ended when they reached the original “morada,” (family house of worship) where, since its founding in the early 1800s, pilgrims have lightly tread with fervor across the Santuario’s “El Posito” (sacred sand pit) dirt floor believing it was a conduit of God’s divine powers. Touching the dirt, grazing their fingertips across the fine soil, was a sacred, and, hopefully, curative act for these pilgrims in search of healing. It has been called the “Lourdes of America.” Today, one can still see visitors at El Santuario making their way to the “El Posito,” and, with perhaps a few pious pilgrims in their midst.

The other type of pilgrim is motivated by an entirely different calling. Getting to the historic shrine is not their mission, but it’s close enough

to their goal, close by way of proximity and connection with the soil. Small fields of the legendary Chimayo chile dot the rugged mountain landscape throughout the historic village like a leprechaun’s pot-of-gold where one only needs to reach the ends of the rainbow to find the riches. Connoisseurs in search of the legendary green, red and “Christmas” Chimayo Chile are delighted when their pilgrimage concludes with a bag of Chimayo chiles, worth a pot-of-gold to those that make the trek to find it.

Faith and farming are intertwined in Chimayo. First settled in the 17th century and colonized like many of the villages in Northern New Mexico, Chimayo reflects the roots of its Spanish ancestry in its food, religion, art and architecture. Most clearly, it can be seen through the community’s strong Catholic history with its connection to El Santuario. Faith and the majesty of God’s miracles go hand-in-hand when planting chile. Juan Ramón Trujillo, born in 1927, grew up farming the native chile. He explains that typically a farmer plants three seeds in each hole. “One for the birds, one for God and one for them.” And further explains the more comprehensive Chimayo Chile farmer way of planting five



Doña Cruz and Lucia Fresquez
Photo courtesy of Native Hispanic Institute

seeds. “One is for God, one for the sick, one for old people, one for the lazy and the last seed is for the farmer.” While it might be a stretch to say the chiles are divinely inspired, the chile has historically been tended by pious farmers of great faith, which are grown in the same soil said to have healing properties. However it is noteworthy to remember, as Father Casimiro Rocha, who has attended his flock at El Santuario since 1954, has said many times, “God heals, not the dirt!”

That being said, why are chile aficionados so enthralled with Chimayo chile? It basically comes down to flavor. As one local resident vouches, “you can’t beat the flavor; if I bite into another chile, it is like biting into a weed.” The pure native strain has a medium heat with a robust, smooth, full flavor with chocolate-tinged base notes. Chile lovers taste more intense flavor than they sense heat on the palate. Many home cooks prefer the spirited zest that Chimayo Red adds to their made-from-scratch sauces and stews. Chimayo chile powder can be identified by its pottery, red-orange color. Once tasted, there is no mistaking the flavor of the true native strain of Chimayo Red Chile. “It is like a good wine versus a flat wine,” declares Victoria Martinez, who, with her husband, Alfonso, farms Chimayo Chile. In the fall, tourists can see drapes of vibrant red Chimayo chile strings dangling from the eaves of many houses and garages, air-drying in the mountain sunshine, including the Martinez house.


The piquant chile is considered a pure native strain. The species is very unique; there is none like it genetically. As a native plant the chile has adapted to its environment over hundreds of years, which makes it more durable in a sense than commodity chiles. As a natural, native strain, Chimayo Chiles have a higher tolerance to blight, drought, and diseases

than hybrid crops. As a specialty crop it does not produce a high yield and has been farmed locally in Chimayo since the 17th century. It’s reputation as a fine premium chile has circulated throughout New Mexico for at least 100 years.

Some local families have been farming chile for generations. They remember their great-great-grandparents who passed on the coveted seed to the next in line, securing the chile plant as a local crop. Older farmers, now in their 70s and 80s, have their own recollections of trading and selling chile at market and beyond the village. Ross Martinez, who is a descendant of the man who built El Santuario, remembers at age nine or ten, his mother sending him out to sit in front of El Santuario to sell Chimayo chile to tourists at twenty-five cents a bucket. As a young boy, Chimayo chile farmer Jose Abelino Martinez remembers traveling the dirt roads by horse-drawn wagon for months at a time selling chile with his family.

In recent years, with many aging farmers having difficulty tending their fields, the beloved Chimayo chile crop diminished rapidly, becoming in danger of extinction. And to the dismay of the community, the name “Chimayo” was attributed in marketing chiles that were not grown in the local area or from the native seed – diluting the legendary status of the uniquely flavored pure-strain chile. These two factors jeopardized not only the true authenticity of the crop but also whether or not the chile would survive into the next generation of farmers.

Fortunately for the community of Chimayo, in 2005, Native Hispanic Institute president, Marie Campos became involved in the need to preserve the native strain chile. At that time period only five farmers were identi-



LOCATION: Chimayó is located 40 miles south of Taos and 24 miles northeast of Santa Fe, and about 10 miles east of Espanola on Hwy 76 (called the "High Road to Taos") in the Sangre de Cristo mountains. Elevation is 6,220 ft.

LEARN MORE ABOUT the Chimayó Chile Project by contacting the Native Hispanic Institute. Go to their website at www.nativehispanic.com.

PURCHASE Chimayó Chiles from www.nativehispanic.com or in the village at Galleria Ortega and/or Trujillo's Weaving Shop.

Contact NHI in Santa Fe
email: nhi@mindspring.com
Tel: (505) 983-2112
Fax: (505) 983-1733

Galleria Ortega in Chimayó
TOLL-FREE: 1-800-743-5921
Fax: 1-505-351-4158
ortega@newmexico.com

**Trujillo's Weaving Shop
& Visitor Center in Chimayó**
Tel: (505) 351-4457
truweaving@newmexico.com

**New Mexico chefs using Chimayó Chile
as referred by Marie Campos:**

- Tucumcari Mountain Cheese Factory/Rick Riddle Wine & Cheese
- The Santa Fe School of Cooking

Tours Available During Harvest Season:
Check with the Native Hispanic Institute at their office for half-day tours beginning in Chimayó. Cost is \$55/per person which covers lunch. Tours include visits to El Santuario, the plaza, farms, and art places, and meetings with local people.

Best Time to Visit for Harvest:
Farmers begin harvesting "green" in August and September. "Christmas" and "red" hang from rafters in October through early November.

fied still growing the chile. Campos says, "I was drawn to the beauty of this native chile's 'pure-nature' and its cultural history, which inspired me to pursue its preservation." Based in Santa Fe, the Institute's mission is to represent and advocate legitimate interests of Native Hispanic peoples in ways that are integral to the preservation, development, advancement and continuance of indigenous living traditions in the Americas.

In 2005, Campos, along with other preservationists, farmers and government officials started the "Chimayo Chile Project." The group's first priority was to trademark the chile and to harvest as much chile seed as possible. Campos' dedication paid off; she is happy to report that certification of "Chimayo" was registered with the USPTO. "This helps protect both consumers and Chimayo chile farmers against those who try to falsely market other types of chile products under that name," informs Campos. She believes that the resulting certification will have a

positive effect on the farmers by increasing the value of their product as authentic *Capsicum annum cv. 'Chimayo'*, grown in the geographical area Chimayo, New Mexico. Now, as stated in a memorial confirmed by the New Mexico State Legislature, "the name 'Chimayo' for chile shall continue to be the name that identifies the native strains of chile that were inherited from the traditional families who founded and named the village of Chimayo in New Mexico."

The next step in the Project is now underway. Enough seed has been harvested for older farmers to mentor and show the process to the next generation of Chimayo Chile farmers. The NHI partnered with Santa Fe County to grow chile on seven acres of public land behind El Santuario de Chimayo where educating young farmers continues. 56 farmers are now enrolled in the Project to preserve and harvest the native strain of chile in Chimayo. The Project provides seed to farmers who meet the criteria of continuing the tradition of growing the specialty crop who live in the village.

Born and raised by his grandparents in Chimayo, Barney Trujillo is a 29-year old younger generation farmer. He inherited his grandfather's land, which has been in the family for 100 years. He remembers his grandfather growing chile and other crops on the one and a half acre field surrounded by Cottonwoods and Aspens. "My grandfather died when I was 16 and the field remained vacant for 10 years afterwards," says Trujillo. Seed was difficult to get because it was normally passed on within families. "In some cases, grandparents have died and younger farmers do not have access to the seed, which was in my case," adds Trujillo. Through the efforts of Marie Campos and NIH, Trujillo was able to acquire free seed within the Project. He also credits his neighbors, who used to farm the chile, as instrumental in the whole farming process.

Everybody chips in at the Trujillo household. "Grandma watches the baby and my mother, wife and oldest daughter help out in the field." It's a lot of work confides Trujillo. He emphasizes that the hardest part of the farming process is controlling the weeds. "Seems the weeds grow faster than the chiles," he laughs. No chemicals are used at all in the farming of the chile. "Just the seeds, soil, acequia water (irrigation canal) and a hoe are used to farm our chile," states Trujillo, who yields about 300 bushels of chile per acre.

Trujillo feels blessed to be able to farm his land. He credits his religion and faith as instrumental components for his success and fortitude. Trujillo says, "I learned it takes patience to do this type of work. Learning patience and having faith are the most important things, to believe everything is going to work out for a good purpose." Being raised near El Santuario de Chimayo, within the arms of the religious Catholic community, inspired Trujillo to believe that all will work out in the end. Trujillo explains having a family at a young age made him more responsible and brought him out to the field. He believes, "As we get older it is our job to teach kids how to be responsible and that just means taking care of what you have. I think that will lead to the chile."

Now, whenever Trujillo travels outside of the village and people find out he is from Chimayo, the first question they ask is, "Where is the chile?" Proudly, now he can reply, "how many bags do you want, I am a Chimayo chile farmer." That is, if he has any left. 🍅