

La Capilla de Todos los Santos, or the Chapel of All Saints, sits at the top of the mesa overlooking San Luis at the Shrine of the Stations of the Cross. People from across the globe come to visit the shrine's bronze sculptures depicting the events leading to Jesus Christ's crucifixion.

San Luis

What's *new* in Colorado's
oldest town

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The buildings are adobe, the language is Spanglish and the culture is ancient in this small town founded 25 years before Colorado became a state.



Many in San Luis grew up speaking a dialect of Spanish similar to the language spoken by the conquistadors.



became United States territory – in theory, at least.

The Utes still controlled the valley in 1848, when Don Dario joined a 16-person group that tried to settle San Luis. The Indians killed eight settlers, and the other eight fled back to Taos. Three years later, a second effort at establishing a village took root here at foothills of Culebra Peak.

San Luis and smaller villages along Culebra Creek were settled as part of a land grant issued by the Mexican government before the area became U.S. territory, so many Spanish-Mexican rules and traditions were grandfathered in. Residents share ownership of La Vega, a 600-acre pasture east of town where locals may freely graze small numbers of cattle. The Culebra valley's acequia system of shared irrigation ditches dates to medieval Spain. Even the way people speak is tied to the distant past. Many in San Luis grew up speaking a dialect of Spanish that is closer to the language of the Spanish conquistadors than it is to the language of present-day Mexico, though a hybrid form of Spanglish has become more common.

The first houses and businesses in San Luis were built of adobe bricks made from mud and straw in the style the Spanish borrowed from native peoples. Many adobe buildings remain, some of which look like ordinary houses save for the glimpse of mud bricks visible in cracks in the stucco. The adobe Sangre de Cristo Catholic Church is at the town's center, physically and spiritually. San Luis is majority Catholic, and even people who aren't Catholic see the church as a force that unites the community – a fact made especially clear during the tenure of parish priest Patricio Valdez, known to all as Father Pat.

HAILING FROM CAPULIN, a town across the San Luis Valley, Father Pat arrived as parish priest in 1985, when San Luis had fallen on hard economic times. He immediately got residents working with him to improve the town, inspired by his artistic and economic vision for San Luis. Nowhere is his legacy more visible than on the mesa north of town at the Shrine of the Stations

Cashier Carmelita Borrego greets Sabrina Martinez and little Norrina Soto at the state's oldest continuously operating business, the R&R Market, which opened in San Luis in 1857. A motorcyclist rumbles past conquistadors, priests and shepherds on one of San Luis' many murals.

ADOBE OVENS ARE almost as common in San Luis backyards as barbecue grills are elsewhere in Colorado. When September arrives, those dome-shaped ovens, or hornos, are fired up to make this town's best-loved food: chicos.

In a strictly literal sense, chicos are dried corn kernels. In a more poetic sense, they are hundreds of years of Hispanic and American Indian heritage in edible form. Many, if not most, of San Luis' 629 residents descend from Spanish settlers who came to this part of the world as early as 1598, mixing cultures and bloodlines with the Pueblo Indians of northern New Mexico. Chicos were a Pueblo staple that the Hispanos readily adopted.

On his ranch just west of town, Joe Gallegos makes chicos using the methods of his ancestors, who helped found San Luis in 1851. Gallegos used adobe bricks to build his two hornos, the oldest of which lasted 27 years before needing repairs this year. He grows his own concho corn, a rare heirloom variety passed down over generations, and harvests each ear by hand. Roasting the corn in the wood-fired horno takes all day, and drying the corn outside takes another week or two. The chicos are worth the wait. When it's time to eat them, Gallegos simmers them for a few hours and eats them plain or in chicken soup. Everyone has their own favorite way to enjoy chicos' sweet and smoky flavor. At the general store on Main Street, owner Felix Romero says they're best served with ham hocks and bolita beans, another local heirloom crop.

Gallegos and Romero share a great-great-grandfather, Don Dario Gallegos, who was among San Luis' first residents. The cousins experience Don Dario's legacy in quite tangible ways. Gallegos

irrigates his farm with water from the San Luis People's Ditch, the state's oldest water right, which Don Dario helped create in 1852. Romero's R&R Market, the state's oldest continuously operating business, was founded by Don Dario in 1857. The past is present everywhere in San Luis, the state's oldest continuously inhabited town, settled some 25 years before Colorado became a state.

"OLDEST TOWN IN COLO." is spelled out in white-washed stones on the sage-dotted mesa overlooking San Luis. The giant letters are visible from the air, but even without that reminder, pilots can recognize San Luis' long history from the shape of its farm fields.

Farms dominate much of the San Luis Valley, a 75-by-125-mile stretch between the San Juan and Sangre de Cristo mountains near the New Mexico state line. Most land is platted in the big squares typical of American farms, with center-pivot irrigation filling those squares with distinctive circular patterns. A different pattern emerges at the valley's southeast edge, where San Luis lies along Culebra Creek. Rather than squares and circles, the farms here are divided into long, narrow strips that radiate like ribs from the spine of the creek. This is the long-lot system, a vestige of Spanish colonial rule.

The people who started San Luis came here from north of Taos, New Mexico, an area that had been part of New Spain from the time of the conquistadors until 1821, when Mexico won its independence. The Mexican era was short-lived, and by 1848, Taos, the San Luis Valley and much of the American West





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ARTIST *masquerades* as BARISTA

VENTERO OPEN PRESS on Main Street is a coffee shop only in the loosest sense of the term. Strangers stopping in for a cappuccino don't know that Randy Pijoan, the lanky man behind the espresso machine, is a nationally acclaimed painter, but they soon suspect something is different here. As they step onto the red mat in front of the coffee bar, Pijoan offers an unexpected greeting: "Don't leave the red carpet if you hate art."

There's a lot of art going on beyond that carpet. The walls are filled with paintings by Pijoan and others, and most of the room is occupied by a studio where artists – both professionals and local students – are hard at work creating beautifully rendered lithographs. Coffee is just the hook, Pijoan said. "Everybody knows what coffee is," he said. "If they step off the carpet, they learn about lithography."

Ventero Open Press is a nonprofit that Pijoan (pronounced pij-WAN) started in 2007 to give young people in San Luis a place to get hands-on art experience. Every day, students are here learning etching, block printing and lithography. They use Ventero's presses to create prints that they can sell in the storefront.

Pijoan grew up in the mountains near Bailey and went to school in Conifer, where he befriended *South Park* creator Trey Parker, with whom he worked on the show's pilot. Pijoan struggled early in his painting career, living in a cabin in the mountains above Boulder, where he was so malnourished he got rickets. A Boulder gallery discovered him, and soon he was selling out shows in Colorado before moving to Chicago and finding even more success.

He moved to a straw-bale home in the San Luis Valley to get back to his Colorado country roots. Soon after that, he suffered a medical emergency that left him clinically dead for 20 minutes. Recovering from surgery after his near-death experience at age 32, he dedicated his second chance to helping San Luis' students realize their artistic dreams. "If it turns out my last day is spent here helping these kids, I'm fine with that," Pijoan said.

Randy Pijoan jokingly strikes a Superman pose – one of Ventero's resident artists had just mentioned that this posture improves one's health.



Built by WPA workers in the 1930s in the area's traditional style, the Sangre de Cristo Heritage Center is being revamped as a community center.

of the Cross. Following his lead, the town helped raise money to build the adobe Capilla de Todos los Santos, or Chapel of All Saints. On a long, zig-zagging trail leading up to the chapel are 15 awe-inspiring bronze sculptures depicting the events culminating in Jesus Christ's crucifixion. People from across the globe come to San Luis to visit the shrine.

These Stations of the Cross statues are the work of San Luis native Huberto Maestas, a sculptor whose studio fills the former Costilla County Shop on South Main Street. The works are the crowning achievement of Maestas' celebrated career, but he never would have created them if it weren't for Father Pat's persistence.

Maestas had been living in Colorado Springs when Father Pat first tried to contact him to work on the Stations of the Cross, but the artist didn't return his calls, thinking the priest wanted him to make stained-glass windows. Undeterred, Father Pat did some sleuthing and found out where Maestas would be fishing while in town visiting family for Thanksgiving. "I was out on the river when here comes this guy," Maestas remembered. "He said, 'I'm Father Pat,' and he went right to the point."

Father Pat's projects seemed endless, from turning a disused convent into El Convento Bed & Breakfast to repairing the mission churches in the villages surrounding San Luis. At Old San Acacio, a few miles down Culebra Creek, he assembled a make-

shift crew to save the crumbling adobe church there, which, like so many things in San Luis, is the state's oldest. There was a gaping hole in one of the walls that needed urgent care, said Teresa Vigil, who worked closely with Father Pat. "We put on jumpsuits and rubber gloves and plastered the adobe with our bare hands – a bunch of old ladies like me!" Vigil said. "One lady who couldn't work made a big meal for everybody."

After the building was saved, people in San Acacio found unfinished church pews sitting on their doorsteps, prompting the townsfolk to ask Father Pat why they were there. He explained that they each had to sand and finish a pew for the church.

Like the whole of San Luis, Vigil has dearly missed Father Pat since he left in 2006, first to recruit new priests in Nigeria and then to serve a new parish at Cortez in southwest Colorado. She hopes he will return to San Luis as his clerical career draws to a close.

Vigil continues to volunteer her time to the church, working in the Sangre de Cristo Church's gift shop in San Luis. The tiny store stocks the expected rosaries and icons, but it's also the go-to place to get traditional Hispanic and Native American folk remedies that Vigil picks in the wild – chokecherries, yerba buena and especially oshá, a root with a reputed power to cure almost anything. Some people even think oshá can ward off snake bites. Vigil learned herbal medicine from her grandmother, and she

'We grow up together, go to school together, live amongst each other, see each other on a daily basis. You're basically like family.' – Donna Madrid

passes down her wisdom by leading herb-picking expeditions for any who want to learn. She advises a cautious approach, both to preserve endangered plants and to preserve those who would pick them, as the wonder drug oshá looks dangerously similar to poisonous hemlock to the untrained eye.

There is more than one tradition of healing in San Luis. For decades, a group known as the Circle of Friendship has come to the aid of families who have just lost a loved one. Following San Luis tradition, the family of the deceased hosts a massive banquet for all mourners after the funeral, sometimes drawing as many as 350 people. To help grieving families, members of the Circle of Friendship, mostly women, donate their time to cook and serve the post-funeral meal in the parish hall to any who ask.

The Circle of Friendship requests a small fee to defray some expenses, but even that isn't set in stone. When a poor family didn't have the money to pay the fee, the ladies cooking and serving at the post-funeral banquet all pitched in to cover the cost of the meal.

People in San Luis have their quarrels, but when tragedy strikes,

people hurt for their grieving neighbors, said Donna Madrid, who has volunteered with the Circle of Friendship since the 1970s. "We grow up together, go to school together, live amongst each other, see each other on a daily basis," Madrid said. "You're basically like family."

That familial connection between neighbors was evident on a recent Thursday afternoon when Juanita Valdez dropped by La Rosa Mistica Coffeehouse. Valdez had just moved back to town after spending the better part of two decades living in Denver; like a number of younger people in San Luis, she had moved away to find work. As Valdez waited for her order to come up, a familiar face came through the door – Yolanda Martinez, an old classmate she hadn't seen in 20 years. They exclaimed, hugged and got a little teary-eyed. Martinez asked what brought her to town.

"I'm here to stay," Valdez replied.

"Are you serious? I heard the rumors – the rumors are true," Martinez said.

"Rumors in San Luis? I can't believe it," Valdez said, smiling.

Not only has Valdez returned, so has her sister, Evelyn, and they hope to entice other San Luis expatriates to come home by opening the Painted Sage Events Center in a restored Victorian house on Main Street. They hope it will be a draw for musicians, writers and artists.

There's a concerted effort in town to keep young people in the valley and draw San Luis natives back home by reinvigorating the economy. Bob Rael, executive director of the Costilla County Economic Council, has a full slate of initiatives toward that end. The most exciting project is the restoration of the Sangre de Cristo Heritage Center, a massive WPA-built structure that will in a few years house a museum.

The museum and events center will likely draw people to San Luis. In the meantime, the coming of chicos season always brings people back to San Luis. At Joe Gallegos' ranch, he's likely to see brothers, sisters, friends and cousins from Denver and Wisconsin and beyond. "It's a time family comes together," Gallegos said, "to cook in this horno." 🌿



Longtime San Luis residents are free to graze their cattle on La Vega, a 600-acre commons east of town. Like the town itself, this communal space traces its origins to a Mexican land grant.

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