

Frito Pie~Eyed

On a quest to taste every version of a fabled dish that's both lowbrow and beloved, you just might discover New Mexico in a bag.

BY *SAMUEL GILBERT*

PHOTOS BY *GABRIELA CAMPOS*

Santa Fe's Capital High School basketball games come with a side of Frito pie, a staple at sporting events all across the state.



T ARRIVED IN A SMALL yellow bag, cut open lengthwise, with piping-hot red chile, ground beef, and beans poured directly over the corn chips inside, all topped with diced onions, yellow cheese, and lettuce. A server handed it to me across the lunch counter of the Five & Dime General Store in downtown Santa Fe. I was 10 or 11, and this, my first Frito pie, was magical. A rich and iconic New Mexican meal.

Nearly two decades later, I am at El Paragua Restaurant in Española, anxiously awaiting another helping—the last meal in a yearlong culinary odyssey that has taken me and my partner, photographer Gabriela Campos, all across the state in search of the best Frito pie.

“For me, the ratio has to be just right,” says Olga Martinez, standing over a pot of chile in the restaurant’s kitchen. “Just enough meat and red chile so that the Fritos don’t get soggy. And it has to be eaten



New Yorkers Marian Bull (left) and Emily Glazer Font enjoy their first Frito pies—a “bag of excitement,” they said—at Santa Fe’s Five & Dime. Facing page: Freshly made Frito pies at El Paragua, in Española.

right away.”

Martinez co-owns the family-run business, which includes seven takeout restaurants, called El Paradol, in northern New Mexico, all of which make Frito pie. “We began serving this in the late sixties, early seventies,” she says, setting down two plates, piled high. She sips her coffee as we eat. The pies are salty and decadent. I detect a bit of brightness from the veggies and a spicy red chile that cuts through the richness of the Fritos. Delicious. As good as any I ever had.

“It’s a simple, good food,” Martinez says.

It’s New Mexico in a bag.

The Frito pie remains a wonderful, if anachronistic, thing. It’s a combination of American junk food and traditional Southwestern ingredients—corn, beans, and chile. It’s blue-collar, unpretentious, and a bit odd. It’s like Cincinnati’s spaghetti-chili combo, Quebec’s poutine, or Hawaii’s Spam and eggs—regional specialties as bemusing to outsiders as they are beloved by locals.

“It is such a New Mexican food now,” says Santa Fe food author Lynn Cline. “It’s ingrained in our culture.”

But it’s a relatively new phenomenon. Legend has it that the idea originated in the 1960s at the lunch counter of the old Woolworth’s (now the Five & Dime) and was served then, as it is now, directly in the bag.

“I wouldn’t consider eating it unless it’s served in a bag; otherwise it’s not authentic,” says celebrated Santa Fe chef Rocky Durham. “It should be eaten out of the bag with the flimsiest plastic fork possible and far too few napkins. It’s messy, accessible, inclusive, and classless.”

Today it proliferates at community events, football games, state fairs, and rodeos. School cafeterias serve it. It’s even moved from the bag to the plate, with restaurants from Las Cruces to Shiprock serving it. “When we moved here in 1968, none of the New Mexican restaurants had Frito pie on their menu,” says Five & Dime owner Earl Potter. “It wasn’t a fundamental part of New Mexico cuisine, but it is now.”

Even so, New Mexico and the old Woolworth’s don’t have a lock on the origin story. Some credit Carmen Ornelas for dreaming it up in the old bus depot’s café on Water Street in Santa Fe, where she worked in the 1950s. (To further confuse matters, she later worked at Woolworth’s.) My investigation at UNM’s Center for Southwest Research unearthed a reference as early as 1948 in the *Las Cruces Sun-News*. We may never know exactly where in New Mexico it first emerged.

That matters because Texas holds a cross-claim on the dish. Kaleta Doolin, daughter of Fritos inventor Charles Doolin, says her San Antonio-based mother first made the dish in 1932 when she poured canned chili—meat, onions, tomatoes, beans, and spices—over her family’s corn chips.





“Those Frito pies were always made by someone’s mom. They give you that feeling of home, even if you’re not at home.”



“The connection is really contentious, because the origins of the Frito pie remain shrouded in mystery—much like the way the dish is shrouded in the Frito bag,” Cline says.

Durham acknowledges that the preponderance of history leans toward a Texas origin but adds, with a smile, “I will just ignore that truth.”

Olga Martinez had her first Frito pie at the Woolworth’s, and it reminded her of home. “My mother made something like it, with fried tortilla strips topped with red chile and meat.”

But Woolworth’s popularized the dish and established the crucial difference that makes it ours: New Mexico red chile. Chile with an *e*, not Texas-style chili with an *i*. Of the dozens of restaurant owners and cooks I spoke with, all agreed that Frito pie is, at its best, a celebration of authentic, unadulterated red chile.

At Abraham’s Tiendita, a wonderful old candy store in Las Vegas, New Mexico, an excellent Frito pie comes covered in a red chile sauce made with garlic, chile powder, and crushed red chile flakes. “Straight up New

Mexico chile, no other spices,” says a cook at Laguna Burger, another Frito pie favorite, on Laguna Pueblo, with a new outpost just south of 12th Street and Menaul Boulevard in Albuquerque. Even Blake’s Lotaburger, New Mexico’s largest local fast-food chain, has a Frito pie, one that marketing director Lucy Rosen assured me is made with “traditional red chile,” not Texas chili.

Then come the variations. Shotgun Willie’s, in Red River, serves a more Tex-Mex variety, with cumin, tomatoes, and beans in the chile. Nexus Brewery, in Albuquerque, makes it with barbecued pulled pork. Sister Bar, in Downtown Albuquerque, offers a vegan Frito pie. Santa Fe’s Chicago Dog has one with both red and green chile. Other variations are few and far between. “Everyone pretty much does it the same,” Martinez says. “It’s about the chile.”

The importance of that was made clear in 2013 when chef Anthony Bourdain came to New Mexico for his *Parts Unknown* TV show. For the episode, he stopped by the Five & Dime and, after being handed a Frito pie, made an off-color remark about it and then claimed, inaccurately, that it was made by “pouring canned Hormel chili” into the bag. New Mexicans rose up in anger. Every local paper covered the controversy,

Frito pie gets a Tex-Mex treatment at Shotgun Willie’s, in Red River. Facing page: Pojoaque Valley High School senior Kristy Miera serves Frito pie during a basketball tournament.



FIVE GREAT FRITO PIES

We asked Samuel Gilbert and Gabriela Campos to name a few of their favorite off-the-beaten-track dens of crunchy bagged goodness.

Duran's Central Pharmacy, 1815 Central Ave. NW, Albuquerque; (505) 247-4141, duransrx.com/restaurant

↳ A bustling restaurant located inside a pharmacy (opened in 1942) in historic Old Town. The Frito pie is a vehicle for Duran's delicious red chile, some of the best in the city.

Laguna Burger, 14311 Central Ave. NW, Laguna Pueblo; (505) 552-1022

↳ Set within the 66 Pit Stop at the Laguna Superette, this charming old-style diner serves a massive Frito pie that makes the perfect, if messy, road snack.

Abraham's Tiendita, 151 Bridge St., Las Vegas, NM; (505) 425-0930, on Facebook

↳ Inside this old candy store on the historic plaza, the Frito pie gets an added kick from the crushed red chiles in its sauce.

El Farolito, 1212 Main St., El Rito; (575) 581-9509

↳ This cash-only restaurant in a tiny adobe house takes some driving, but the Frito pie is as good as the location.

El Parasol, 603 Santa Cruz Road, Española; (505) 753-8852, elparasol.com

↳ The original El Parasol in Española is the best. Order the Frito pie, served with either red or green chile, from the unassuming shack. Grab a plastic fork and a few napkins, sit down at a picnic table, and enjoy.



which was picked up by the Associated Press and carried as far away as England. Bourdain eventually said he had gotten it wrong.

"I was stunned by the outcry," Potter says. "There is a lot of emotion surrounding this food." Nonetheless, the national attention apparently did little to hurt his sales. The Five & Dime now serves about 25,000 Frito pies a year.

At the time, the backlash seemed almost ludicrous to me, given all the other great food here. But as I ate my way around the state, I came to understand the response as being protective of Frito pie's celebrated New Mexican-ness, even if Texas disagrees. People connect to this meal as part of a collective nostalgia that comes from the Frito pie's association with our childhood years and the communal activities that defined them. Gabriela still swears by the \$4 Frito pie at St. Michael's High School, which she ate every day from seventh to eleventh grade (except on chicken nugget day).

"Nostalgia is a big part of it," says Edward Gomez, a native New Mexican now living in Los Angeles whom I ran into at the Five & Dime. He wanted to grab a Frito pie before heading home because it reminds him of the concession stands at elementary school sporting events. "Those Frito pies were always made by someone's mom. They give you that feeling of home, even if you're not at home."

That feeling is the beauty of the Frito pie. A deeply New Mexican dish, an insider's food that everyone can and should enjoy. Go out and find your favorite. Use its unpretentious accessibility to explore New Mexico and the places and restaurants you might otherwise pass up. You may find, as we did, hidden gems, those surprising and character-filled eateries where residents' memories and feelings about Frito pie will fill you up as well. ■

Samuel Gilbert and Gabriela Campos are featured in "Storytellers," p. 8.

Clockwise from above, left: In Socorro, El Camino's Frito pies fuel local college kids. Olga Martinez of El Paragua ladles on the chile. La Cueva Café, in Taos, fills its small space with big flavors. **Facing page:** Bags of Fritos await their reincarnation at the Five & Dime in Santa Fe.