

Good Food

One Key to Nurturing Community in Santa Fe's Southside

by Lynn Cline



For nearly a decade, Josh Baum and Ann Gordon have provided a lively gathering place in Santa Fe's burgeoning Southside, a warm and inviting place for celebrating a milestone, gathering with friends and family, sharing a romantic date or simply stopping by after work for some outrageously good barbecue.

Perched on a rise above the southern end of Cerrillos Road, The Ranch House restaurant stands out as an oasis among acres of strip malls, car dealerships, chain stores and restaurants, and residential developments. It's simple yet elegant ambiance blends Southwestern and cowboy décor in a historic New Mexico hacienda-style setting, with mountain views and a spacious open-air patio. This BBQ bar and grill draws locals and visitors from all walks of life and of every age, too, who share a love for excellent food and camaraderie. It's hardly surprising that Tripadvisor announced at the beginning of August that The Ranch House ranked No. 23 nationally in the "everyday dining" category of their Travelers' Choice Awards.

"Ann and I thought that Santa Fe was really missing a restaurant on the south side of town that was something for everyone, where you could come in and be casual," Baum

says. "And if you're doing construction all day, you can come sit at the bar and have some wings and feel comfortable in your work clothes, or you could come in and celebrate a birthday or anniversary. We thought the south side of town was growing, and that this is where a lot of people live who keep the city running."

Given that the Southside continues to grow — the four-story, 342,000-square-foot Presbyterian Santa Fe Medical Center opened in 2018 and new development is ongoing — Baum and Gordon realized it might be time to open a second restaurant. When they learned that a chain restaurant across the street from The Ranch House was re-locating, they fired up their plans.

"We always thought, 'Maybe we'll open another restaurant one of these days,' but we were happy with The Ranch House," Baum says. "Then we heard that Outback Steakhouse was moving and building a new restaurant, so that just got us to thinking, what kind of restaurant were we going to do if we did another one. We had a few ideas, but we settled on Italian. It's a nice departure for us. It's not meat-heavy, and we thought the Southside could use a nice restaurant, something like The Ranch House — different,

casual but nice, an Italian restaurant with homemade pasta, homemade pizza, and offer volume at a really good value.”

With the opening of Rustica, the Southside now has an elegant new restaurant serving affordable Italian cuisine handcrafted with superior ingredients. “You’d be surprised how many Italian restaurants don’t use quality ingredients, such as quality Parmesan Reggiano, which makes a huge difference to flavor,” Baum says. “And then making our own pasta, pizza, chicken Parmesan and salads, adding a little bit of creativity. The menu will evolve, too.”

Anyone familiar with local barbecue knows that Baum, who grew up in Santa Fe, is an excellent judge of what diners want, whether they’re from the Southside or points beyond. A graduate of the Scottsdale Culinary Institute, a Le Cordon Bleu-affiliated school, Baum honed his skills in many restaurants, including the Old House, where he served as sous-chef to celebrated chef Martín Rios. “I worked with Martín for eight years,” Baum says. “He’s a brilliant, disciplined chef.” With such rarified expertise under his belt, Baum left the Old House in 2007 to open Josh’s BBQ, a small, affordable barbecue joint in San Isidro Plaza mall, just up Cerrillos Road from The Ranch House. It quickly became Santa Fe’s hot spot for delectable smoked ribs, pulled pork, tender brisket and more, along with the chef’s famous green chile coleslaw, a staple on The Ranch House menu, too. “I love all foods, so you could get me interested in anything, but I knew that barbecue would do really well here,” Baum says.

Baum opened Josh’s BBQ with his wife, whom he met in 2002. His father, Dr. James E. Baum, a longtime Santa Fe osteopath who’s now retired, introduced the couple. “Ann was a patient of my dad’s, and he and my stepmom liked her a lot. I was married to the Old House every day, and they would say to me, ‘This girl’s really nice.’” Two years later, Baum married Gordon and they brought Josh’s BBQ into the world together. “It was my idea to open a restaurant,” Baum says. “Ann loves barbecue. She loves all my cooking — that’s how I got her. I still cook for her.”

Santa Feans love Baum’s hearty barbecue, too, which explains why Josh’s BBQ outgrew its small space. Five years after opening it, Baum and Gordon knew it was time for a change. They envisioned an

affordable neighborhood restaurant on the south side that would appeal to both residents and visitors from out of town. Thus, The Ranch House was born, with the help of Santa Fe builder John Rehders, Duty and Germanas Architects, and Heather Van Luchene of HVL Interiors. “What we did was, every restaurant that Ann and I went to, we looked at something we liked,” Baum says. “Ann loves arches, so we put arches into the building. I wanted comfortable bar stools. Heather helped us bring that vision to life. We told her our vision, that we wanted to make this a restaurant for everyone. And I think we achieved that. It’s nice, but it’s not too nice. You walk in and it’s comfortable, like a historic Santa Fe house, with little rooms and patios sectioned off, but with a little modern touch.” Van Luchene states, “We started working with Josh and Ann on the Ranch House in 2011, nine years ago, and I believed that several of our clients referred us to them. It was a fun project. . . They came to us with a vision. They said, ‘We want to create a beautiful restaurant on the southside that serves quality food, that’s family owned. We want to do something different over here.’ They really gave us the freedom to create something that met their vision.”

To create Rustica, Baum and Gordon turned to the same team, apart from the architect. “Heather Van Luchene did an amazing job again, and we worked with the same builder, John Rehders, who built the Ranch House, and with architect Michael Krupnick.” Taking inspiration from colorful Italian ingredients and gelato, Van Luchene created an interior that is light and bright, with lots of windows, mosaic floor tiles and Italian marble. Two large family-style tables emphasize



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Opposite page: The soon-to-open Rustica will feature fresh Italian cuisine. Above: Restaurateurs Josh Baum and Ann Gordon sitting with their dog Charlie in Rustica opening in 2021.



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the restaurant’s commitment to community. Van Luchene explains, “We wanted to make them special. They are in the back of the space. Each one has a beautiful light fixture over it and a painted alcove. The banquettes are curved, and they have this great plaid fabric. We played with menswear and thought about Italian-made fabrics and fashion. We had fun with layering texture and patterns and color.”

While the food at The Ranch House and at Rustica is rooted in different countries, the menus share something in common: Baum carefully designed each to offer something for everyone. For The Ranch House, that meant expanding beyond his signature meats smoked with Texas brown oak, such as red chile honey-glazed baby back ribs and eighteen-hour smoked brisket, and adding a mouth-watering array of other dishes: sensational salads, New Mexican specialties, steaks and burgers made with local, natural beef, and even seafood, including grilled salmon and BBQ shrimp pasta. For Rustica, Baum spent part of the pandemic shutdown testing and re-testing items for the menu, including fresh pasta, pizza dough and sumptuous sauces. Although he has

postponed the restaurant’s opening out of abundant caution regarding the pandemic, Baum will be ready when it’s time. (Check the restaurant’s status before heading there.)

The addition of Rustica to Santa Fe’s Southside promises to bring more delicious nourishment to the community. “With all these new homes and the hospital, we’re getting a lot of chains opening in the Southside, and we’re trying to stake a claim for independent restaurants,” Baum says. “What happens in a lot of suburban communities is that chains come in and take over. So we’re grateful that we’re able to stake a claim here so that people can eat at local restaurants.”



Cooking utensils and copper lamps add warm notes to Rustica’s interior design. The fabric on the chair backs reflects the influence of Italian menswear.