



TAOS NEWS

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Like art, like chocolate

Explore Taos Historic District's rich and diverse artistic legacy



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Couse-Sharp Foundation Director Davison Koenig welcomes tourists to view the historic home and studio of Taos Society of Artists founders Eanger I. Couse and Joseph H. Sharp.



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By Lynne Robinson

What does art have to do with chocolate, you may be wondering?

More than you might imagine, especially here in New Mexico, which has long been a cultural crossroads, millennia before any Europeans set foot on this continent, with Chaco Canyon a central hub of the ancient trade routes.

A World Heritage Site, the massive stone structures left by Chaco's indigenous inhabitants have fueled the curiosity of anthropologists and archaeologists for more than a century - each discovery made begs more questions about the people who called it home. One thing we know for sure is that chocolate was part of everyday life.

By analyzing pottery sherds, University of New Mexico archaeologist Patricia Crown uncovered a surprising fact a few years ago, when she and a chemist at the Hershey Company unearthed the first evidence of chocolate being used at Chaco, far north of the cacao-growing regions of Mesoamerica.

Angelisa Espinoza Murray, the founder of Heritage Inspirations, which offers specially crafted tours designed to attract a high-end market, including a "glamping" trip to Chaco Canyon, draws inspiration from the long history in the region, of both art and chocolate, with her half-day Taos Artisan Walking Tour. Winding through the town's alleys and side streets, the stroll invites visitors into select galleries, studios and museums, to experience firsthand the art colony that continues to draw both artists and art lovers to Taos.

Offered every Thursday from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. and Fridays from 2-5 p.m., Espinoza Murray says that "it's a perfect way to experience the living artist colony of Taos."

The tour invites visitors to Taos to explore the downtown Historic District's rich and diverse artistic legacy, spurred initially by the Taos Society of Artists, while introducing visitors to contemporary artists, including Rich Nichols, who works in Ernest Blumenschein's original studio.

An exploration of Taos' artistic heritage would not be complete without a visit to the Couse-Sharp Historic Site, where the past and present converge in the house, studio and gardens of the Taos Society of Artists founders.

Several galleries are included in this tour, from the traditional local favorite Parsons Gallery to contemporary gems like MoMo. See the work of Taos Pueblo artist Jocelyn Martinez and her partner Ryan Suazo, along with viewing Navajo and Spanish textiles at Tres Estrellas, while enjoying a weaving demo on a traditional Spanish Colonial loom by Carla Bogdanoff. And, of course, any tour through the Historic District has to include a visit to the Taos County Historic Courthouse to see the frescoes painted by members of the Taos Society of Artists.

"We conclude the tour at Chokola Bean to Bar," Espinoza Murray said. "Their hand-crafted chocolate elixirs are out of this world, and are the perfect ending to a winter's day stroll."

From San Sebastian, in Spain, Javier Abad and Debi Vincent, the owners of Chokola, met in Venezuela, where she grew up. Vincent is the daughter of a mother with Italian roots, and a father from Taos, and her grandmother was Jenny Vincent, the folk singer who came to Taos from Chicago. Vincent was well-known in Taos as a teacher and political activist. Jenny Vincent became intrigued with folk music early on in her life,

seeing it as the "music of the people," a powerful tool for social advocacy. She performed with folk music legends Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger among others who used their voices for social justice and civil rights. Vincent first visited Northern New Mexico in 1936. She died here in May of 2016 at the age of 103.

The mother of two, Debi Vincent is an art historian, who prior to opening Chokola worked for a time at the Harwood Museum. Abad has a background in film. They initially moved to Taos to take care of her ailing grandmother. "In 2016, after we completed an extensive workshop in bean-to-bar chocolate under two world renowned chocolatiers, we opened Chokola Bean to Bar café and chocolate factory in our current location between Taos Plaza and John Dunn Shops," Vincent said.

Since then the couple has gone on to win numerous national and international awards for their "bean to bar" chocolate that has no relation to the candy bars most Americans are familiar with. The chocolate made at Chokola is, as the Aztecs claimed, truly the "food of the gods." High in antioxidants, complex with flavors drawn from the earth it's cultivated in, and once properly fermented and prepared, the chocolate is a feast for both body and soul.

"We have spent years perfecting the making of craft chocolate and finally bean-to-bar, so we are grateful for the recognition that is represented by these international awards. But it is just as rewarding and exciting to be appreciated here at the local level, by our Taoseno neighbors," Vincent explained.

The packaging itself is also worth noting: several local artists to date, including Larry Bell, Erin Currier and Matt Thomas among them, have collaborated with the couple to create unique branding for Chokola, with limited edition wrappers, a direct influence of Vincent's academic expertise.

So when they were contacted by Heritage Inspirations, the couple was happy to get on board. "Angelisa contacted us saying she wanted to include us in their tours, so when we have time either me or Debi will personally explain the process of making chocolate to them. If we are busy in production, our staff will do it," Abad explained. "The response, I think has been good. They keep coming."

From the small (biodynamic) growers they buy from to the global movement of artisanal chocolatiers who are changing the way we relate to the food itself, Chokola is part of a continuum that is as old as the Americas themselves.

For more more information or to reserve a tour, call (575) 779-5516.

FYI BOX

Taos Artisan Walking Tour

Thursdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. and Fridays 2- 5 p.m.

Meets at El Monte Sagrado Resort, 317 Kit Carson Road

Fee \$85 per person plus tax(575) 779-5516