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FOOD

By Tarajia Morrell
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In Marfa, Eating the Ancient Way



At the Capri, a new menu celebrates local flora and fauna — and ancient civilizations. Credit Nicole Franzen

“Every mesquite tree tastes different, so you have to walk around tasting them all,” says chef Rocky Barnette about the southwestern plant that grows plentifully in Marfa, Tex., where he lives and cooks. The indigenous flora and fauna of the sleepy town have become an obsession for Barnette. So much so that in December, he will launch a preconquest tasting menu — a collection of dishes inspired by the ancient cuisines of the region — at [the Capri](#), the restaurant and events space owned by his wife, the arts and culture philanthropist Virginia Lebermann.



Chef Rocky Barnette (left) spent eight years at the Michelin-starred restaurant the Inn at Little Washington, before moving to Marfa. Credit Nicole Franzen

If Barnette's unusual concoctions, such as prickly pear wine and marigold vinaigrette, give him a reputation among locals as a mad scientist chef, then Lebermann, a Texas native, may well be the creative community's unofficial mayor. In 2003, Lebermann and the arts patron Fairfax Dorn co-founded the arts and culture nonprofit Ballroom Marfa, creating a gallery and performance space in a converted 1927 dance hall. Then, in 2004, Lebermann doubled down on her commitment to the blossoming artistic community that had grown around Marfa's Judd, Chinati and Lannan foundations, and purchased a dilapidated 1950s motel, the Thunderbird, which she resuscitated and reopened the following year. The adjacent military hangar next door would eventually become the Capri — with interiors styled by the Hollywood set designer Sean Daly ("Sherlock Holmes"), and food that speaks to the town's diverse lot of cattle farmers, expats and artists.

Barnette's early years were formative, and a precursor, you could say, to his new menu. Growing up in North Carolina, he cultivated cactuses and chiles in his trailer park garden before leaving home at 18. He then spent three months off the grid in Querétaro, Mexico, without running water, electricity or telephones before an eight-year-stint at the Michelin-starred restaurant near D.C., the Inn at Little Washington. When Barnette moved to Marfa, he worked in consumer advocacy, educating the community on the Farm Bill, and eventually opened a waffles, shrimp and grits joint called the Miniature Rooster with a chef pal. He also met Lebermann, almost immediately upon arrival there, and advised her on creating an affordable and efficient kitchen in the Capri.



Some of Barnette's dishes at the Capri. Credit Nicole Franzen

"It came out of these conversations where he was evolving these ideas about where we were and what it was like thousands of years ago," Lebermann says of Barnette becoming the chef at the Capri, and his new preconquest tasting menu. They hiked through neighboring ranches, and found glyphs, arrowheads and early *metates* (mortars) carved into the rocks — evidence of ancient civilizations and proof that there was a way to live off the land even in the arid environs of Marfa, where current residents rely on trucks to ship in most of their food and often dine at the local Dairy Queen. Barnette began to taste every native plant he encountered. He combined ground mesquite beans with Hayden Mills flour and club soda to create a tempura batter for frying yucca blossoms. "It tastes different than anything you've ever had, but there's enough in there that people recognize," Barnette explains. "'Tempura fried...wait — what's a yucca blossom?' They ask a question."

As chefs increasingly [look to the past](#) for inspiration, Barnette hopes his preconquest menu will provoke locals — who, he says, often ask, "Rocky, what the hell are you doing?" They shake their heads at toasted Oaxacan grasshoppers, indigenous insects valued for their high protein content. "We've never had a schtick about anything," Barnette insists. Commenting on why he thinks the Capri's new menu will work in Marfa particularly, he says: "It's small, it's rural, it's a destination — not just for art, but for culture."