

A Dash of Wisdom

Celeste Wisdom, owner of Tumacacori's Wisdom's Café and Tubac's Wisdom's ¡DOS!, dishes on family, border food, and the appeal of quirky décor.

BY SUZANNE WRIGHT | PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL FALCONER

Wisdom's Café has been a Baja Arizona culinary way station for decades, serving Mexican and border food to generations of visitors and residents. How'd you get involved?

I married into the family. Grandparents of my husband, Cliff, started Wisdom's in 1944. In 1980, my in-laws grew it with clientele from Green Valley. Cliff and I took it over about 10 years ago.

Wisdom is a pretty cool family name.

I'm told it is of Dutch Cherokee origin. My maiden name was Martin.

Nice upgrade! The café has been run by five generations of family members.

This has always been a family place, with my mother-in-law cashiering and my father-in-law bartending. Cousins and aunts, nieces and nephews work with us. Clientele really care about our family and want to see us when they come in. When I was pregnant with Sasha we had a "Guess the Due Date" game. It was really beautiful, like having thousands of grandparents who care about you and watch your kids grow up. And we're excited when they bring in their kids and grandkids. We get a lot of love from the restaurant.

What's changed?

Looking at our menus, you can see how we've evolved.

Now you have gluten-free, vegan, and vegetarian offerings.

We still have the chimichanga, relleno, tamale, and *fruta burro*, and they are still super popular. We make everything in-house. I don't cook and I got a bit bored with our small little menu, so I figured if we wanted variety and different things, so would other people. Gluten-free and vegetarian is not a big part of our customer base, but we try to do something for everyone. Cliff is a meat eater. So if he likes the vegan or vegetarian stuff, we know it's a winner.

Wait a minute ... You run a restaurant and you don't cook?

Yes. It's a joke in our family. But I do know what I love to eat. And over the last year, the two incredible women chefs we hired for Wisdom's ¡DOS! have taken us to the next level. I say, "This is what I want," and they translate it into delicious dishes. Every morning we have tastings of the proteins, the guacamole, and sauces.

Tell us about the genesis of the fruit burro. That's not a traditionally Mexican dish.

A fruit burro, like a chimichanga, is totally a border food. You're not going to find a Sonoran hot dog in Mexico, either. But the point is they taste good! Border food is what it is. We're proud of it.

Decades ago, my father-in-law's mother made something sweet and it was delicious. It's a flour tortilla, deep fried until it's



Celeste Wisdom says that Wisdom Café's famous fruit burro is "totally a border food."



The décor at Wisdom's Café evolved over the years, as customers brought in decorations and family heirlooms emerged.

crispy, rolled in cinnamon sugar and filled with cherry, apple, blueberry, or coconut crème. You order it at the same time you order your meal.

I'm salivating! Let's talk tamales. In my opinion, a good tamale is transcendent.

Tamales are truly a Mexican tradition; they are all the way Mexican, eaten at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Everybody makes them at Christmas and New Year's, from 2-year-olds to 80-year-old matriarchs. There's a lot of laughing and singing, but they are very labor-intensive. We had someone who made our tamales and then she left. So we used Tucson Tamale Company, which we loved. They'd deliver to us, but when that stopped we couldn't be chasing tamales.

Now that we have Maria (Malu) Orrantia and Maria (Mary) Diaz, we are making our own. We've got green corn, calabacitas, Cliff's with turkey, black bean and red peppers, and red with shredded beef and jalapeño tamales. The green corn, calabacitas and Cliff's come in a vegan version and all are lard-free and gluten-free except for the red. We also offer a dessert tamale, a sweet pineapple coconut with pecans. We think that snowbirds will want us to ship them [back home].

One thing that makes Wisdom's Café so memorable is the décor, chock full of personal artifacts.

Nothing is contrived or planned about the décor: it's eclectic. Over the years, our customers have brought us a lot of stuff, and there are a lot of family heirlooms. We've got antique and cowboy items, Little League baseball mitts from the 1950s, a bear trap, and a sombrero from the 1940s. One entire wall is made up of murals.

There used to be this patchwork carpet in one of the rooms. People were tripping on it, so we ripped it out and replaced it with a concrete floor; that was a really big deal. People said they couldn't believe we took it out. We got a lot of flak for that. I guess it's generational.

When I first walked in, I was like, "What is this?" Now I've developed an appreciation. You name it, we've got it. It's like a museum.

Tell us about Wisdom's ;DOS! in the Village of Tubac. How do the food and decor differ from the Café?

They are like apples and oranges. ;DOS! is our little baby, where we do more traditional Mexican food like street tacos, menudo, posole, ceviche, and fish soup. We didn't know how it would go over, but much to our happiness, it's been great. We've decorated with things from off our own walls, and pulled things out of boxes all with the theme of Dia de los Muertos. We even designed special tables. We wanted it to have its own identity.

I think you've tapped into an authenticity that people are really responding to.

;DOS! is quick casual—we give 10 percent off to all Tubac employees. We do a big lunch business. At the Café, we can't make anything too spicy; at ;DOS!, we have three salsas and people want super hot. We've got beer and wine, but we plan to bring in delicious white sangria. And ;DOS! is going to get its own margarita.

Where do you and Cliff go for culinary inspiration?

We love Caruso's Italian Restaurant on Fourth Avenue. I worked there in college; it's an Arizona business. We have a lot of family celebrations there. I adore the shrimp cakes and Caesar salad at Kingfisher. And Reilly Craft Pizza and Drink on Pennington has great pizza and a really good mixologist. And of course, Café Poca Cosa with Chef Suzana Davila. I'd love to have a loft downtown. The food in Tucson is amazing!

Southern Arizona is truly a place apart.

I'm not knocking the chains, but there's flavor here, there's discovery. Tubac Olive Oil Company, Santa Cruz Chili & Spice, Tumacookery—you're not going to find those places anywhere else. ♦

**Wisdom's Café. 1931 E. Frontage Road, Tumacacori.
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Suzanne Wright is a Cave Creek-based freelance writer who can't wait to try a dessert tamale on her next trip south.