



Every year on the Friday before Easter over 50,000 people make a pilgrimage to the small chapel of Chimayo in northern New Mexico. There are Roman Catholics and Protestants—Moslems and Buddhists—Jews and Native Americans. Most of the pilgrims have walked from the town of Espanola which is 9 miles from the chapel. But many have come from much farther away and have been walking for days.

Some carry giant crosses in remembrance of Jesus. Thousands are physically handicapped and make the trip in wheelchairs or on crutches. They come in search of an inner peace—to heal both their body and their mind. Chimayo has become the Lourdes of North America.



Michael Sheehan, the Archbishop of New Mexico joins the procession but not in his official capacity—he walks as just another pilgrim.

For many, the walk is a family tradition—their parents walked with their grandparents, they walked with their parents and now they are walking to Chimayo with their children.

### THE LEGEND OF CHIMAYO

On Good Friday in the year 1810 an Indian farmer was plowing his field on the slopes of the Sangre de Cristo mountains in northern New Mexico. An angel appeared and told the farmer that he was standing on sacred ground. The farmer continued his work, until he suddenly uncovered a cross which he took to the local parish. The next morning the farmer and the local priest arrived at the

church with the intention of inspecting the cross. The cross, however, had returned to the mud pit in which it was found. Three times they took it to the church and three times it returned itself to the pit, at which point it was considered a sign and a small chapel was built at the site of the pit.



There are various versions of the legend, but the central elements are always the same. The land is sacred. A buried crucifix was discovered and taken to the local church. On three occasions the crucifix was taken from the spot where it was found to the church, and each time it mysteriously returned to the pit where it was discovered. A chapel was built over the pit.

### THE CHAPEL OF CHIMAYO

The land around the chapel has been sacred to Native Americans for over 10,000 years. The chapel was put up in 1814 and is only a simple adobe mission, but it is also one of the most valued religious sites in America, and since 1970 it has been a National Historic Landmark.

Every morning, Mass is offered by Father Casimiro Roca, who has been here for over 50 years. Father Roca is also in charge of sprinkling Holy Water into the sacred sand pit.



### THE SAND PIT

At the rear of the church is a room with a small round hole in the floor. It is the sacred

sand pit at the center of the mission and the primary focus for many of the 300,000 pilgrims who come here each year. Pilgrims kneel or lie down on the floor and reach into the pit. They use a spoon or trowel to scrape out some of the sand which is considered to have the ability to both cure and protect. Some pilgrims taste the sand, others take a little home and mark their doors and windows to guard against evil spirits. It is similar to the rituals I saw at Lourdes in France.



Many pilgrims believe that no matter how much sand is removed from the pit it has the miraculous power to refill itself and never get any larger. The staff who restock the pit daily believe that the real miracle is the faith of the pilgrims and the cures that have taken place.

The walls of the mission are covered with small metal images of various body parts that need curing, as well as canes and crutches attesting to the cures. There are also offerings that request cures. It's easy to write off the stories about the cures that have been reported, but you would be making a big mistake.



Every year we see more and more medical evidence indicating that belief can have a monumental effect on the course of an illness. And that's true even if you are not consciously aware that you believe.

A while back, there was a fascinating experiment. A group of patients who had been put under general anesthesia for surgery were given a suggestion that they would recover quickly. The patients who received the encouragement recovered much faster than those who didn't. They also had no conscious memory of what was said to them while they were asleep. Quite amazing! It appears that belief in the outcome of events, conscious or unconscious can have extraordinary power.

## MILAGROS

Most non-Hispanic Americans first came across the word *milagro* in the title of Robert Redford's film *The Milagro Beanfield War*. The Spanish word *milagro* means miracle or surprise and in the case of the film it refers to the miraculous greening of a long fallow beanfield.

Traditionally, the word *milagro* is used to describe small silver or gold colored offerings in the shape of arms, legs, other body parts or animals. They are attached to the statues of saints or the walls of churches as a request for help in connection with that body part or as thanks for help already received.



Milagros can be flat or sculptured, small or large and made of virtually anything the petitioner thinks is appropriate. You can have one made for the occasion or purchase a ready-made model from the vendors that surround a church.

In parts of Latin America, when the parish priest decides that a particular statue is overweight with *milagros* he sells them back to the vendor and contributes the money to the church.

The use of milagros in Mediterranean cultures goes back for thousands of years—it is a pre-Christian ritual. When the practice was brought to the Americas it was easily adopted by the

Native Americans who had similar traditions involving small amulets.

Milagros are magical messages that are common to most cultures. They can be used in religious or secular situations.

Sending someone a heart-shaped *milagro* can express a hope that they will be able to lower their cholesterol. An arm and a leg can express a wish for good luck when you're looking for a mortgage. An ax might suggest ending a relationship.

In essence, everyone from pilgrims to the most sophisticated visitor purchase milagros in an



## WHERE TO EAT

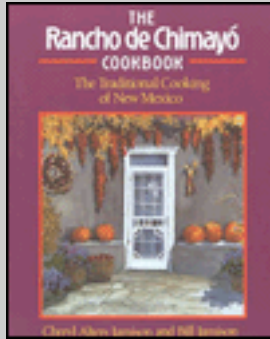
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**THE RANCHO DE CHIMAYO COOKBOOK:**  
**THE TRADITIONAL COOKING OF NEW MEXICO**  
BY CHERYL ALTERS JAMISON AND BILL JAMISON  
HARVARD COMMON PRESS, 1991  
ISBN: 1558320350

effort to heal someone or themselves. The impulse underneath these purchases is to help someone in need.

### SANTOS, BULTOS & RETABLOS THE SANTA FE MUSEUM OF SPANISH COLONIAL ART

As Spanish priests established congregations throughout the New World they found it increasingly difficult to obtain traditional European images for their churches. The shortage was particularly acute in areas that were distant from Mexico's major cities.



The problem was partially solved by having local craftsmen produce the

statues. In some cases the priests did the carving and painting. The images were taken from contemporary paintings and sculptures in Mexico, as well as, prints of works by European masters. When they were blessed by a priest they became the receptacle for the supernatural spirit of the saint. They were called *Santos*.

In Chimayo, the most popular *Santos* figure is Santo Nino Atocha—a representation of the baby Jesus. It is believed that each night he leaves the chapel and travels throughout the district on errands of mercy, often wearing out his shoes in the process, which is why pilgrims bring baby shoes as an offering.



Something to pray to is an essential element in all religions, and *Santos* offer a physical object that can receive the prayers of the faithful. Santos are still used in homes throughout the Americas. One of the largest collections of Santos is in Santa Fe's Museum of Spanish Colonial Art.

### RAMON JOSÉ LÓPEZ



Ramon José López is a native of Santa Fe and has been instrumental in the revival of the art-form known as silver hollow ware in which a small sculpture is formed by pushing out the shape from the back of a sheet of metal. The technique goes back for hundreds of years. By studying both private and museum collections he has been able

to master the traditional method for producing these works. His designs come from images used by New Mexican colonial silver workers who were influenced by craftsmen in Spain, France and Latin America.

### CHILI

Chimayo's second claim to fame comes from its chili peppers. Chili first came to New Mexico in

## WHERE TO STAY

In 1876, Abraham Staab, who had emigrated to Santa Fe from Germany purchased a plot of land on Palace Avenue and began working on the mansion which he had promised his new bride. The building was a formal brick structure in a classic European style.

About 100 years later the structure was incorporated into a new hotel complex know as La Posada which means "the resting place". Today, La Posada is made up of a series of adobe buildings that sit on six acres of pine trees. The 157-room resort offers adobe-style guestrooms and suites, many with kiva fireplaces and shady patios. The resort's Avanyu Spa has made La Posada Sante Fe's only full-service hotel spa which offers spa treatments featuring ingredients indigenous to the American Southwest.

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1598, along with the earliest Spanish settlers and today, more chili peppers are grown in New Mexico than any other state in the US. Red and green chili comes from the same plant. The green chili is fresh, the red chili has been given time to ripen.



They are ripened on strings, then ground to bring out their naturally sweet flavor and are highly valued by the world's chili lovers. The birthplace of the hot pepper was probably central Bolivia, and they have been in use by the native population of Mexico for at least 7,000 years.

But for most of those years they have been used primarily as a medicine. The chemical in a



pepper that makes it hot is called *capsaicin*. It is a natural decongestant and an active ingredient in many common

medications.

Some authorities believe that hot peppers are addictive. They say that when the *capsaicin* in the pepper hits the nerve endings on your tongue your brain thinks your body is being attacked and responds by delivering endorphins that are painkillers. The endorphins also give you a slight but pleasurable high similar to a very mild dose of morphine. Every time you take a bite of the pepper, you get another hit of endorphin.

### WHAT'S COOKING

The place to test out the theory that chili is a source of pleasure would be the restaurant at Rancho de Chimayo, which is in an old hacienda near Chimayo's central plaza.



The Rancho was originally put up in 1601, by the Jaramillo family who can trace their roots to the earliest Spanish settlers in New Mexico.

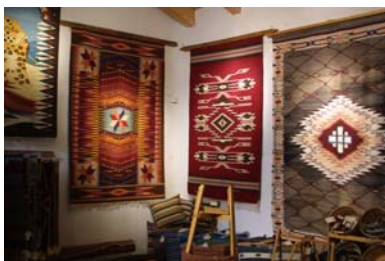
These days, Florence Jaramillo runs the restaurant which offers native northern New Mexican dishes, prepared with local ingredients and based on recipes that have been in the family for generations.

## THE WEAVERS

The town of Chimayo is also known for its weavers including the Centinela Weaving Shop which is run by Irvin and Lisa Trujillo. They are award-winning weavers whose works have been shown and collected by museums throughout the United States including the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. They specialize in hand-woven wool works that use natural dyes, custom-dyed and hand-spun yarns and traditional Chimayo and Rio Grande weaving styles.



Irvin's father was one of New Mexico's Master Weavers and he taught Irvin the ancient and traditional skills of the craft. Irvin practiced during his summer vacations from school and after graduating as a civil engineer from the University of New Mexico he decided that weaving was more civil than engineering.



Their work preserves and continues the amazing history and culture of Chimayo and its role in the history of the United States.

## THE MIX

Chimayo and the pilgrims who come here reflect the cultural history of New Mexico. Native Americans who have lived here for over 10,000 years, Spaniards who arrived in the 1500s and Anglo-Americans who came during the 1800s.

Each group brought their own religious beliefs and rituals, and today the shrine and the town around it mirror that history. The mission's most important function, however, is to act as a looking glass for the people who come here—to let them catch a reflection of their own inner faith, and to remind them of the importance of the spirit—something that Chimayo has been doing for thousands and thousands of years.

## TO LEARN MORE...

### ARCHDIOCESE OF SANTA FE

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### CENTINELA WEAVING SHOP

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TEL: 505.351.2180  
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### THE CENTINELA WEAVERS OF CHIMAYO: UNFOLDING TRADITION

BY MARY TERENCE MCKAY & LISA TRUJILLO  
CENTINELA TRADITIONAL ARTS, 1999  
ISBN: 0966886208

### CHIMAYO – HOLY FAMILY

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