

On notice



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*On second
thought ...*

Somebody at the New Mexico Tourism Department must be doing something right.

Those of us who grew up in New Mexico, or have lived here for any length of time, know that there is a lot to see and do in our beautiful Land of Enchantment. The rest of the country, it seems, is finally beginning to catch up. In the last month alone, three very different notices were given calling attention to the fact, two of them in high-profile publications.

The most notable of the three would have to be USA Today, which released the results of its "Best Iconic American Food" contest on July 24. The list, made up of popular foods from all over the country, included such tasty treats as Maryland crabs, Philly cheese steak, Key Lime pie and fried cheese curds. Topping the list at No. 1, however, was something those of us in the know can't live without: green chile.

We'll even forgive them for listing Albuquerque as the home base for the exaltation, because anybody with any knowledge of the piquant pod will tell you, Hatch is home to the best and, right now, New Mexico State University is ground zero for experimentation that is turning the humble pepper into an international phenomenon. A fact not lost on the next dispenser of extolment.

The August issue of Popular Science, the last bastion of proletarian nerd knowledge, provided the second prominent laudation by placing not one but three New Mexican destinations on its annual list of the 25 "Best Nerd Road Trips." Two of them were in the top five, which quite frankly is where they should be. Two of them were also southern New Mexico stops, which for those of us who live here, is hardly surprising.

At No. 4 on the road trip list is the awe-inspiring Very Large Array, located outside of Socorro, physically, and on the must see lists of every Jodie Foster fan, eternally. No. 5, and destined to rise even higher once the facility is fully functional, is Spaceport America, our own little piece of space history in the desert, just

an arrow's flight from Las Cruces.

Coming in at No. 24 is NMSU's Chile Pepper Institute Garden, where heat is measured in Scoville units and fire extinguishers have no more effect than a tub of Häagen-Dazs. With exotic names like Bhut Jolokia and Moruga Scorpion emerging from the institute and creating international buzz, it's clear that when it comes to specializing in spice, southern New Mexico is the focal point. Put that in your enchilada and roll it, Albuquerque.

The third big accolade came from a less notable source, but wins points for enthusiasm. Lifestyle website YourTango.com released a list of "7 Romantic Fourth of July Getaways for Couples," which placed southern New Mexico in the company of such tony destinations as San Luis Obispo, Calif., Asheville, N.C., and Rockport, Mass. The site also scored major points with its descriptive acknowledgement.

"YourTango knows New Mexico has more to offer than Santa Fe and Taos," the writers said ingeniously. "They suggest taking a weekend trip further south. Base your getaway in Las Cruces and stroll the romantic historic plaza of Old Mesilla. Watch the sun set over the gypsum sands at White Sands National Monument, go hiking in the majestic Organ Mountains, and eat as much green chile as you want at the many mom-and-pop Mexican restaurants."

Clearly these people did their research. The secret, it seems, is out. And why shouldn't it be? It wasn't so long ago that New Mexico was considered the "missing" state in the union. Books were written, calling attention to the ludicrous media gaffs and personal reflections by people who, apparently, weren't paying attention in geography class and couldn't wrap their heads around the idea that New Mexico and Old Mexico were two completely different places.

There's a subtle irony at play here, in that just a few weeks ago, on June 13, the news was released that the Department of Homeland Security had ruled to extend the border commercial zone from 25 to 55 miles in southern New Mexico. Which means, with all the heavy marketing campaigns and advertising dollars being spent south of the border, it won't be long before we begin seeing a far more international face on our business trade here in the City of the Crosses.

Add to that the Borderplex boom and the aforementioned Spaceport America and you've got a recipe for intense international scrutiny and a potential for even more glorification of our culturally diverse little corner of the country. Despite the fact that there are many who view all this as an invasion of closely guarded privacy, our lovely state, and the southern half in particular, are finally coming into their own.

And though life may not always be great in Las Cruces, there are enough people working for its greater good to foster inspiration. With a little effort on everybody's part – not just the marketing people at the New Mexico Tourism Department and the Las Cruces Convention & Visitors Bureau, or government leadership at the state, county and city levels – the branding begun right here at the Las Cruces Bulletin, so many years ago, could easily become a national catch phrase.

Because, life really is good in Las Cruces.