

EDITED BY MARY CONRAD

RED OR GREEN?



"Bred on red and weaned on green," Gene Baca answers questions about our state's beloved plant.

Norman Johnson Photography

THE REAL THING:

Gene Baca's family has been in the chile business for decades. Now Gene is working to keep New Mexico chile authentic.

Mirage: Many of our readers may not know that New Mexico has an official state question. Would you tell them what it is?

Gene Baca: The question is "Red or green?" If you're a Lobo and/or a New Mexican, you know that we're not talking about stop lights!

Mirage: Why is chile so important in New Mexico that it warrants an official question?

Gene: We New Mexicans love our chile. It's more important to us even than oranges are to Florida or potatoes to Idaho. In many respects, it defines our

culture and heritage. My family is like many New Mexican families: we eat chile at virtually every meal. At Thanksgiving, we serve red chile instead of gravy with our mashed potatoes. Chile is a huge party of family traditions and celebrations. My kids started eating it at age 2.

Mirage: How important is the growth and harvesting of chile to our state?

Gene: It's extremely important. The chile industry contributes \$250 million to the state's economy. It provides 3,000 full-time jobs and 10,000 part-time jobs. And it comprises primarily long-term,

family-owned farmers and companies who are committed to New Mexico.

Mirage: I understand that the industry has changed in recent years. How?

Gene: The main change is the growth of chile production in foreign countries – Mexico, Peru, and China in particular. Labor costs in those countries are just a fraction of ours, and regulation is much less stringent. Consequently, our costs have increased, and it's hard to keep prices competitive.

New Mexico acres planted in chile have declined from 35,000 acres in the mid 90's to just over 10,000 acres last year. Long-term farmers are getting out of the industry; many will no longer grow chile because of plant disease and labor shortages. Chile crops have gone unpicked because very few people want to work picking chile (the average age of a chile picker is in their 60's). Changes in immigration policy have created a critical labor shortage in the industry for farmers and processors.

All of this is happening at the same time that consumption is skyrocketing.

Mirage: What can be done to give the chile advantage back to New Mexico?

Gene: Mechanical harvesters and automatic de-stemmers would make a huge difference. Until they become available, all the work has to be done by hand. The New Mexico Chile Association is working on automation as well as on establishing New Mexico chile certification so consumers can be sure they're getting the real thing. As it stands now, Hatch green chile doesn't even have to come Hatch!

Mirage: What can *Mirage* readers do to help safeguard New Mexico chile?

Gene: The main thing they can do is request and make certain they're buying real New Mexican chile! If you see "Hatch green chile" available on the market before it's been harvested in New Mexico, chances are pretty good it's not from Hatch! We want to keep New Mexico the chile capital of the US!

Gene Baca

Gene Baca, '82 BS, is senior vice president of Bueno Foods in Albuquerque, and president and one of the founders of the New Mexico Chile Association. He says he has been "associated with Bueno since birth" but began making it his career after graduating from Harvard Law school in 1986. Bueno Foods was started in 1951 by Gene's father and uncles. Today, Gene shares the company's operation with his four sisters – Jackie Baca, '79 BA, '83 MBA, is president – and his mother – all UNM alumnae. Bueno developed the first commercial roasting and freezing process for chile. Gene is treasurer of the UNM Alumni Association Board of Directors.

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development and business advisory company. Most recently, she was founder, director, and CFO of a biotech startup, Acoustic Cytometry Systems, in Los Alamos.

Cecilia Travick-Jackson, '03 PhD, has been granted tenure and advanced to the rank of associate professor at California Lutheran University in Thousand Oaks, California.

Jordan Bell, '04 MS, '07 PhD, works in inpatient psychiatry at New Mexico Veterans Affairs Health Care System in Albuquerque where he provides group and individual psychotherapy, assessment, training, and consultation.

Jeff Fisher, '04 BSCS, has graduated from Baylor University School of Law. After taking the Texas Bar Exam, he will return to Albuquerque to spend one year as a judicial clerk for Federal District Judge James O. Browning.

Kelly Bee, '05 BA, Albuquerque, is the chief financial officer at Holistic Management International.

Lindsey Blessing, '05 BS, graduated from Parker College of Chiropractic and has returned to Albuquerque to join Life Source Chiropractic.

Adabel Allen, '06 BFA, is pursuing a second bachelor's degree and is involved with the new arts management program at the UNM College of Fine Arts. She is employed part-time as the arts facilitator/educator for Art for Health through the UNM Employee Health Promotion Program. A show of her work, "Convergence, mixed media prints," will be part of Albuquerque's *artscrawl* in August.

Elizabeth Barber, '06 BBA, Englewood, Colorado, started working with Moss Codilis as an XML template specialist and help-desk support for SQL and JAVA. She also does public relations, marketing, and event planning with RedElephantMediaGroup.com and RemixCulture.com.

Maralyn M. Beck, '06 BA, Los Angeles, is the marketing communications coordinator for American Honda Motor Company in Torrance, California. She works in the campaign management department, overseeing all national marketing campaigns for the North American Honda enterprise.

James Bloom, '06 BBA, Albuquerque, is sales executive in the commercial sales department of Lovelace Health Plan.

Adriane Irwin, '06 MS, has been elected president of the American Pharmacists Association's Academy of Student Pharmacists. She is a third-year pharmacy student at UNM.