

# The Marfa Salon

IN A CHIHUAHUAN DESERT TOWN, RESTAURATEURS  
VIRGINIA LEBERMANN AND ROCKY BARNETTE  
GATHER ARTISTS AND RANCHERS FOR A SOUTHWESTERN  
FEAST AROUND THE FIRE.

BY TARAJIA MORRELL PHOTOGRAPHS BY DOUGLAS FRIEDMAN



Farmer Jon Sufficool  
kicks off the party with  
a gin martini infused  
with the Mexican herb  
epazote and French  
Chartreuse (p. 100).

**I**T'S A TYPICAL Marfa evening: The sunlight has gone soft and the big sky is settling into a deep trance of blue. Dusk is falling on this quirky desert town, 200 miles south of El Paso in the West Texas badlands. But in the cactus-studded garden behind The Capri, Marfa's best restaurant, the night is young.

You wouldn't figure Marfa for an avant-garde arts enclave, with its single stoplight and rumbling visitations from mile-long freight trains. But the crowd at The Capri tonight—a mix of native fifth-generation ranchers and transplanted artists sipping epazote-infused martinis and breathing in curls of copal incense smoke—tells a different story. Local soap-maker Ginger Griffice catches up with photography expert Alec Friedman, a New York expat, while production designer Sean Daly lays out indigo shawls to keep guests warm later in the evening. In the cozy glow of string lights, prickly-pear winemaker Jon Sufficool chats with Rainer Judd, daughter of the late minimalist artist Donald Judd, who began producing work in Marfa back in 1973.

Judd's name is synonymous with the town's origins as a creative mecca. But it's Capri owner Virginia Lebermann, the barefoot hostess this evening, who is at the heart of Marfa's more recent design and hospitality movement. In 2003 she cofounded Ballroom Marfa, a nonprofit that helped produce, in 2005, the town's most recognizable art installation, Prada Marfa, a faux luxury storefront on an empty stretch of Highway 90. "When we started Ballroom,

there were no cars on the street, just tumbleweeds, and you could die of scurvy," quips Lebermann, who also runs The Thunderbird, an updated 1950s motel, with her husband, chef Rocky Barnette. "Since then people have started to fill the need for thoughtful, healthy food."

Tonight, the couple has invited friends to a "Pre-Conquest" dinner party, showcasing the region's indigenous ingredients and Barnette's whimsy at the wood-fired grill. "If you're going to make a fire to grill

something, then why not grill everything?" asks Barnette, who bounced between North Carolina and Mexico and cooked at The Inn at Little Washington in Virginia before finding his way to Marfa, where he met Lebermann in 2009. And so avocado



Heritage-corn tortillas get filled with smoky, juicy turkey grilled over indirect heat.

halves get a ride on the flames before they're mashed in a molcajete with pico de gallo and served with housemade tostones (plantain chips). Barnette chars tomatoes, onions and peppers in the hot coals, then blends them into a smoky salsa. He slow-roasts turkeys until they take on a mahogany lacquer, crisping their skin over indirect heat. The chef comes honestly to this kind of big-crowd cooking. "In North Carolina we'd do a 'pig pickin'—you build a fire and throw on a whole pig, and everyone sits around and drinks beer for 12 hours until it's done," he says. The same principles apply to dessert pineapples held over the fire for hours to intensify their sweetness, then seasoned with black volcanic sea salt and paired with lime wedges dipped in chile powder.

As dinner unfolds, the conversation flows from art to farming, children to travel. When the temperature does drop, those indigo blankets are at the ready. Lebermann doesn't miss a beat, and pours mezcal and Cognac and coffee to warm everyone up. It's dark now, and as Barnette's fire burns low another flickers in the distance. The beams of a wayward truck? The mysterious Marfa Lights, a phenomenon known to haunt the West Texas skies? In this corner of the high desert, nothing is ever exactly as it seems.

**“If you're going to make a fire to grill something, why not grill everything?”**

—ROCKY BARNETTE



Rocky Barnette chargrills avocados to give his guacamole (served with deep-fried plantains) a smoky dimension.



### Grilled Rockamole

Total 1 hr 30 min; Serves 8

Barnette calls his eponymous grilled-avocado guacamole “vegan foie gras,” because of its creamy texture.

**½ large red onion, cut into ¼-inch dice**

**½ cup finely chopped cilantro**

**4 small jalapeños, seeded and finely chopped**

**⅓ cup fresh lime juice, plus more for brushing**

**3 Tbsp. avocado oil, plus more for brushing**

**Kosher salt and pepper**

**5 firm, ripe Hass avocados, halved and pitted**

**Pinch of ground cumin**

**Tostones (recipe follows) or plantain chips, for serving**

**1.** In a medium bowl, combine the onion with the cilantro, jalapeños, the ⅓ cup of lime juice and 1 tablespoon of the oil. Season with salt. Cover the pico de gallo and refrigerate for 1 hour.

**2.** Light a grill and oil the grate. Lightly brush the cut sides of the avocados with oil and lime juice; season with salt. Grill cut side down over high heat until charred, about 2 minutes. Transfer to a plate and let cool.

**3.** Scoop the avocado flesh into a large bowl and coarsely mash with a fork. Gently fold in 1 cup of the pico de gallo, the remaining 2 tablespoons of oil and the cumin and season generously with salt and pepper. Garnish with the remaining ⅓ cup of pico de gallo. Serve with tostones.

**MAKE AHEAD** The guacamole can be covered with plastic wrap and refrigerated overnight.

### Tostones

Total 1 hr; Serves 8

These twice-fried plantains make crispy yet chewy scoopers for guacamole.

**4 large green plantains**

**Vegetable oil, for frying**

**Sea salt, preferably sal de gusano (see Note) or Himalayan**

**1.** Cut off the ends of the plantains. Using a knife, score each one lengthwise 3 times and pry off the peel. Slice the plantains crosswise into 2-inch pieces.

**2.** In a deep skillet, heat 1½ inches of oil to 350°. Fry the plantains in batches, turning

occasionally, until light golden, about 5 minutes per batch.

Using a slotted spoon, transfer the plantains to a paper towel-lined baking sheet to cool. Using a small skillet, flatten each plantain ⅓ inch thick between 2 sheets of parchment paper.

**3.** Reheat the oil to 350°. Fry the flattened plantains in batches, turning once, until golden and crispy, 4 to 6 minutes per batch. Transfer to a paper towel-lined baking sheet as they’re done and season generously with sea salt. Serve right away.

**NOTE** Sal de gusano, or worm salt, is Oaxacan sea salt flavored with dried worms and chiles.



### Epazote-Gin Martini

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Total **10 min plus 8 hr steeping**  
Makes **1 drink**

The coupe glass gets rinsed with herbal French Chartreuse before the gin is added.

**3 cups gin**

**2/3 cup (1 oz.) dried epazote (see Note)**

**Green Chartreuse, for rinsing**

**Ice**

**2 fresh epazote leaves**

In a 1-quart jar, steep the gin with the dried epazote for 8 hours. Strain into a pitcher. Rinse a chilled coupe glass with Chartreuse, then discard. Fill a cocktail shaker with ice. Add 2½ ounces of the epazote gin and shake well. Strain into the glass. Garnish with the fresh epazote and serve. Use the remaining epazote gin to make more cocktails.

**NOTE** Epazote is a Mexican herb with notes of camphor, mint and citrus. It's available dried at [kalustyans.com](http://kalustyans.com).

### Smoky Pineapple

Total **3 hr**; Serves **8**

Slow-grilling whole pineapples concentrates their natural sugar and gives them a really intense flavor. It's a clean, sweet way to end a meal.

**2 whole pineapples**

**Black sea salt, lime wedges and Korean chile powder, for serving**

Set up a grill for indirect cooking and heat to 300°. Grill the pineapples, turning occasionally, until lightly browned and slightly softened, 2 to 3 hours. Transfer to a carving board and let cool slightly, then quarter each pineapple lengthwise through the leaves. Sprinkle with black sea salt and serve with lime wedges dipped in chile powder.



**Black sea salt and chile-dusted limes balance the sweetness of grilled pineapple.**