

Historic Duke City farm pursues innovation

Written by By Jason Gibbs Finance New Mexico
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With a history of agricultural experimentation dating back to the 1930s and a storied tradition reaching into the depths of New Mexico's territorial history, Los Poblanos Historic Inn & Organic Farm, 4803 Rio Grande Blvd NW in Los Ranchos de Albuquerque, has bridged the centuries and now, with the assistance of New Mexico Manufacturing Extension Partnership, continues to preserve the past and pursue innovation.

The land surrounding Los Poblanos was, sometime around 1716, made a part of the Elena Gallegos Land Grant which surrounded and shaped what is now Albuquerque and was first mentioned in the 1790 Census as one of six settlements in Albuquerque's North Valley.

According to Los Poblanos' website, the original ranch was owned by Abrosio and Juan Cristobal Armijo through the 19th Century and most of the land was in the private hands of Albert and Ruth Simms by the 1930s.

The Simms enlisted storied New Mexico architect John Gaw Meem to design the original house, which is now a historic inn, and La Quinta, now a meeting and gathering space.

By the late 1990s, the land was under the ownership of Armin and Penny Rembe and their extended family, who returned the fields to agricultural use while preserving open space and acequia irrigation practices.

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Organic produce, organic lavender and honey bees are raised, and the property hosts educational and business gatherings and serves as a historic inn with 50 guest rooms. Combined, the staff of 150 plays host to some 100,000 guests a year and turns out handmade organic lavender products that are sought after not only in American markets but overseas as well, according to Los Poblanos marketing manager Lauren Kemner.

As their market expanded, it became necessary to focus on the production side of the business. Enter NM MEP – a nonprofit organization dedicated to making the state's businesses more competitive.

Karen Converse, wholesale lavender operations manager, said Los Poblanos harvests about 6,000 pounds of lavender a year for onsite distillation into essential oils to be used in body care products, including the flagship product, Lavender Hand Salve, which sold almost 16,000 jars in 2017.

"As a small-batch producer, we make six to seven products a day, and efficiency in making these products is paramount as we continue to grow," Converse said. "In the past, one person would take a product and perform all the steps from beginning to end ... using NM MEP to do some training and coaching, we were able to empower our employees to design the way the work was done."

"Using our soap wrapping processes and gift set building as bases for improvement, Andrea [Holling, an innovation director] from NM MEP, worked with the team using rapid improvement techniques to implement changes and see in real time what gains could be had with the suggested changes to the process," Converse said.

The experimentation resulted in a 25 to 50 percent reduction in the time required for the soap production process, according to Holling.

"We are very happy with the growth of the business and the expanded impact we're able to have on the community — employing a growing amount of people while remaining rooted in our core values of preservation and sustainability, all while providing authentic and quality experiences with a story and strong sense of place," Kemner said.

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Los Poblanos is an example of the manufacturing that takes place in New Mexico and that will be on display during Manufacturing Day events scheduled for October.

For more information about NM MEP and Manufacturing Day, visit www.newmexicomep.org. Visit www.lospo.org to learn more about Los Poblanos Historic Inn and Organic Farm. Finance New Mexico connects individuals and businesses with skills and funding resources for their business or idea, www.FinanceNewMexico.org

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