

# Tasting

Lodge Cooking

## Ted's New Mexico Grill

An afternoon cookout at Vermejo, a Ted Turner Reserve, blends New Mexican flavors with back-to-the-land goodness.

By Aaron Gulley



A fly-fishing guide helps  
guests catch what chef  
Giovanni Lanzante then  
grills up for dinner.







Bison roam Vermejo's lush meadows. **Facing page, clockwise from top left:** Chef Giovanni Lanzante. A stylish fish fry. Bison steaks on an open flame.

**O**N A SUNNY FRIDAY afternoon at Merrick Lake, a glinting fleck of marine blue tucked beneath a ponderosa overstory, anglers and outdoorspeople gather to toss horseshoes, trade the day's fishing and wildlife tales, and share food over an open fire.

The Merrick Lake Fish Fry is a rite of summer at Vermejo, entrepreneur and environmentalist Ted Turner's sweeping northern New Mexico ranch. It's a chance for guests to swap the formality of the dining room for picnic benches, wood-fired flavors, and the Culebra Range atmosphere. Held from Memorial Day to Labor Day, the weekly event marks high season on the ranch, a reminder to visitors and residents alike to get outside and savor the golden days of summer.

"Look, there's nothing more fundamental

than gathering with friends and eating food cooked over open flames," says Giovanni Lanzante, Vermejo's executive chef, who organizes the weekly cookout. "And it's a good excuse to get out and take advantage of our backyard."

Calling the 560,000-acre Vermejo your backyard is like calling Amazon a friendly neighborhood store. Vermejo is the largest piece of contiguous private land in the lower 48. Purchased by Turner in 1996, the property continues to run as a hunting and fishing lodge—as it has for nearly a century. But Turner redirected the ranch's aim from profit to conservation.

Vermejo ditched cattle farming, tore down fences, reintroduced bison, and actively works to rehabilitate endangered species, including the black-footed ferret and the

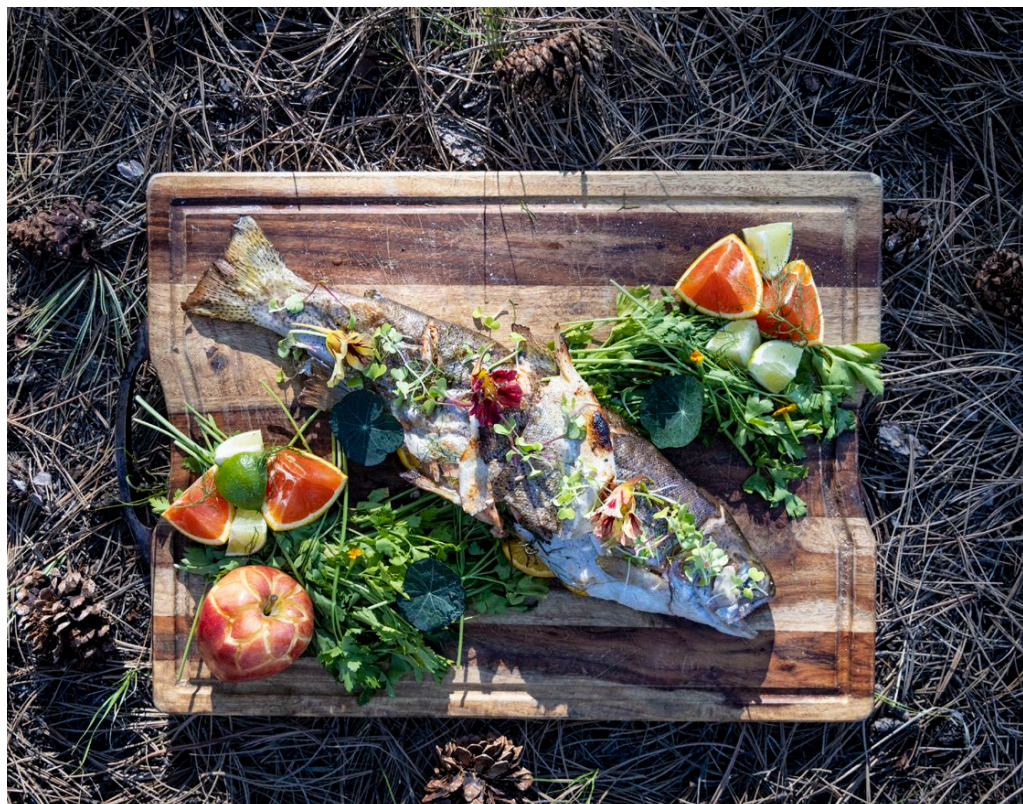
Río Grande cutthroat trout. The end game: Bring the land back to its natural state.

Turner likes to say, "We're in the business of large-scale ecosystem restoration." As proof of the work, visitors taking any given drive on the property can see elk, deer, bison, turkeys, bears, pronghorns, beavers, bobcats, coyotes, and often even mountain lions.

On Friday evenings, guests also get line-caught trout and flame-seared bison tenderloins. Lanzante sometimes puts a New Mexican twist on the classic fish fry with a blue-corn breading for the trout, which can include rainbows and browns hooked from the shores of Merrick. On special request, he'll also grill the trout whole, his preferred method of preparation, as it shows off the flavors of the wild fish.

"A lot of outdoor dining is about letting





the simple flavors shine through,” says Lanzante. “But that doesn’t mean basic. The setting—the glassware, the linen, the silver—still makes it a special experience.”

One perk of living and working at Vermejo, as I do, is the regular opportunity to stop by Lanzante’s station on a Friday. After a long week in the office—yep, ranch workers have desks, too—a few hours in such a pristine setting is a fine reminder of why we work so hard every day.

One recent Friday, spears of light cast the forest in ocher camouflage and ropes of woodsmoke lazed in the trees. With anglers casting from the banks, a family paddling a


canoe across mirror-smooth water, the occasional clunk of a throwing ax finding purchase in the stump target, and guests mingling over plates of succulent meat and fresh fruit salad, the scene gave new meaning to “happy hour.”

Another staple of the Merrick Lake menu is bison tenderloins, which not only reinforce the summer-by-the-lake gestalt but also underscore Vermejo’s mission. One of Turner’s biggest motivations in conservation has always been to help restore bison to the western landscape. He almost single-handedly built a market for the meat with his Ted’s Montana Grill restaurant chain, and his herd, which he started with three animals and now numbers some 60,000 head across 15 ranches. On Vermejo, 1,500 of the creatures roam free.

“People will tell you they don’t like game because it’s strong-flavored,” says Lanzante. “But it’s all in the handling and the

preparation.” On the whole, bison tends to be of a higher quality than beef, because it’s cultivated in smaller quantities and there’s no grading system. Purchasing from a reputable supplier, such as the artisan butcher Beck & Bulow, in Santa Fe, will also ensure the best-quality meat.

Lanzante, who shares three recipes on the following pages, advises grilling slowly over an open flame and turning only once to ensure a good exterior char. “I prefer bison because it’s leaner and healthier, but also because it’s indigenous to this land.”

As with everything on the ranch, the goal is to reconnect guests with the northern New Mexico landscape. “You can actually taste the grass,” says Lanzante. “It’s a taste of Vermejo.” 

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## ROOMS WITH A VIEW

Ted Turner Reserves properties in New Mexico include Vermejo, near the Colorado state line; Sierra Grande Lodge, in Truth or Consequences; and Armendaris and Ladder ranches, near Truth or Consequences. All offer lodgings, day trips, historical tours, outdoor recreation, and opportunities to experience wildlife recovery efforts. [tedturnerreserves.com](http://tedturnerreserves.com)

**Aaron Gulley and Jen Judge** are featured in “Storytellers,” p. 8.



## WILD GAME POT STICKERS WITH CILANTRO AIOLI

Makes 2 dozen

¼ cup olive oil  
1 yellow onion, diced  
2 celery stalks, diced  
½ cup green chile, diced  
2 garlic cloves, minced  
2 shallots, minced  
½ tablespoon ginger, minced  
2 pounds ground wild game such as elk, bison, or venison  
1½ tablespoons cream cheese  
1 tablespoon fresh lime juice  
1 tablespoon soy sauce  
Salt and pepper  
2 dozen wonton skins  
Oil for deep frying

### CILANTRO AIOLI

1 cup mayonnaise  
¼ cup cilantro, chopped  
1½ teaspoons lime juice

1. In a medium saucepan, heat olive oil over medium-high heat, then sauté vegetables, garlic, shallots, and ginger in the oil over medium heat until

browned. Add meat and cook through.

2. Remove from heat. When filling has reached room temperature, mix in cream cheese, lime juice, soy sauce, and salt and pepper to taste.
3. To assemble wontons, lay a skin flat, place about a tablespoon of filling in the center, wet the corners of the skin, and pinch together to seal.
4. In a separate bowl, mix the mayo, cilantro, and lime juice to create the aioli.
5. Deep-fry the dumplings till golden brown, then serve hot with aioli.

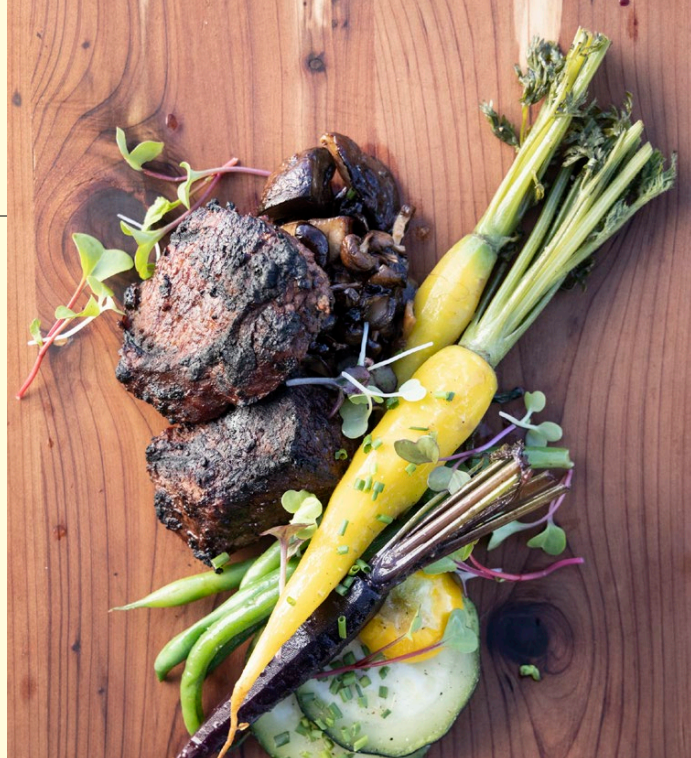
## FLAME-GRILLED BISON TENDERS

Serves 6

Six 6-ounce bison fillets  
Salt and pepper to taste

### MOP SAUCE

¼ cup whole-grain mustard  
2 tablespoons molasses



2 tablespoons red wine vinegar  
¼ cup apple cider vinegar  
2 tablespoons Dijon mustard  
2 tablespoons maple syrup  
2 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce  
1 tablespoon soy sauce  
1 cup grapeseed oil

1. To make mop sauce, puree all ingredients except oil in a blender until smooth.
2. Once pureed, run the blender on low speed while adding the grapeseed oil at a slow trickle.
3. Liberally coat all tenders with sauce, then season with salt and pepper.
4. Slowly char the outsides of the steaks. (The high heat of red-hot coals tends to cook meat better and more evenly than orange flames.)
5. Cook by feel to desired doneness or use a wireless thermometer like the Meater to achieve the optimal temperature.
6. Let rest briefly before serving.

## WHOLE GRILLED TROUT

Serves 1-2, depending on the size of the fish

1 large trout, 3-5 pounds  
2 lemons, cut into slices, plus more for serving  
5 sprigs fresh thyme  
6 cloves garlic  
½ cup (approximately) kosher salt  
3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

1. Clean and gut the fish, washing it thoroughly inside and out. Pat dry.
2. Coat the fish in olive oil, including inside. Stuff the cavity with lemon slices, thyme, and garlic cloves, then season the exterior liberally with salt and pepper.
3. Oil a wire or mesh grill using a basting brush or paper towel, then place the fish over an open fire, being sure that the flame isn't so close that it scorches the flesh.
4. Cook the fish approximately 6 minutes per side, turning only once to preserve the crispy skin. Fish will be done when the flesh is firm to the touch.
5. Use a fish spatula and a knife to gently lift the meat from the bones on one side, then flip and repeat. Serve with a few lemons or your favorite tartar sauce.

