



Photography by Peter Gramis

The Fort near Denver, Colorado, is based on an early drawing of Bent's Fort, completed in 1835 by early day frontiersman William W. Bent near La Junta, Colorado. The post became the pre-eminent mercantile center for the southern plains.

The Fort

*Fine food and drink
from the Early West*

BY CORINNE JOY BROWN

A spiral of smoke swirls into the night above an open courtyard, drawing the eye to the skies over Colorado. Shadows from a bonfire, where pine and mesquite crackle, dance off dark adobe walls while the plaintive sound of a Native American flute hovers in the air.

In this space, time has stopped, or at least has been preserved with the utmost care. And for each traveler who steps through the courtyard portal, the journey continues, happily seducing all of one's senses.

For this is the entry to The Fort ~ a restaurant, museum, and Frontier West tradition, as well as the dream of one man who successfully brought history to life.

The Fort is a reconstruction of a 19th-century frontier fur trading post known as Bent's Fort, originally 126 miles from Denver, built near La Junta during the early 1830s. While perusing historical photographs at the Denver Public Library in 1962, owner Sam Arnold chanced upon a drawing of this enduring and timeless structure. In its powerful outlines, he saw not just an old

trading post but the possibility of a new home and a highly original way of life.

"I could live in a place like that," he thought to himself, and presented the image to an architect. With dedication, commitment, and the support of his first wife Betty, the perfect plot of ground west of Denver was selected ~ a lofty, rock-sheltered ridge of 100 acres, near the Rocky Mountains' front range. There the project began.

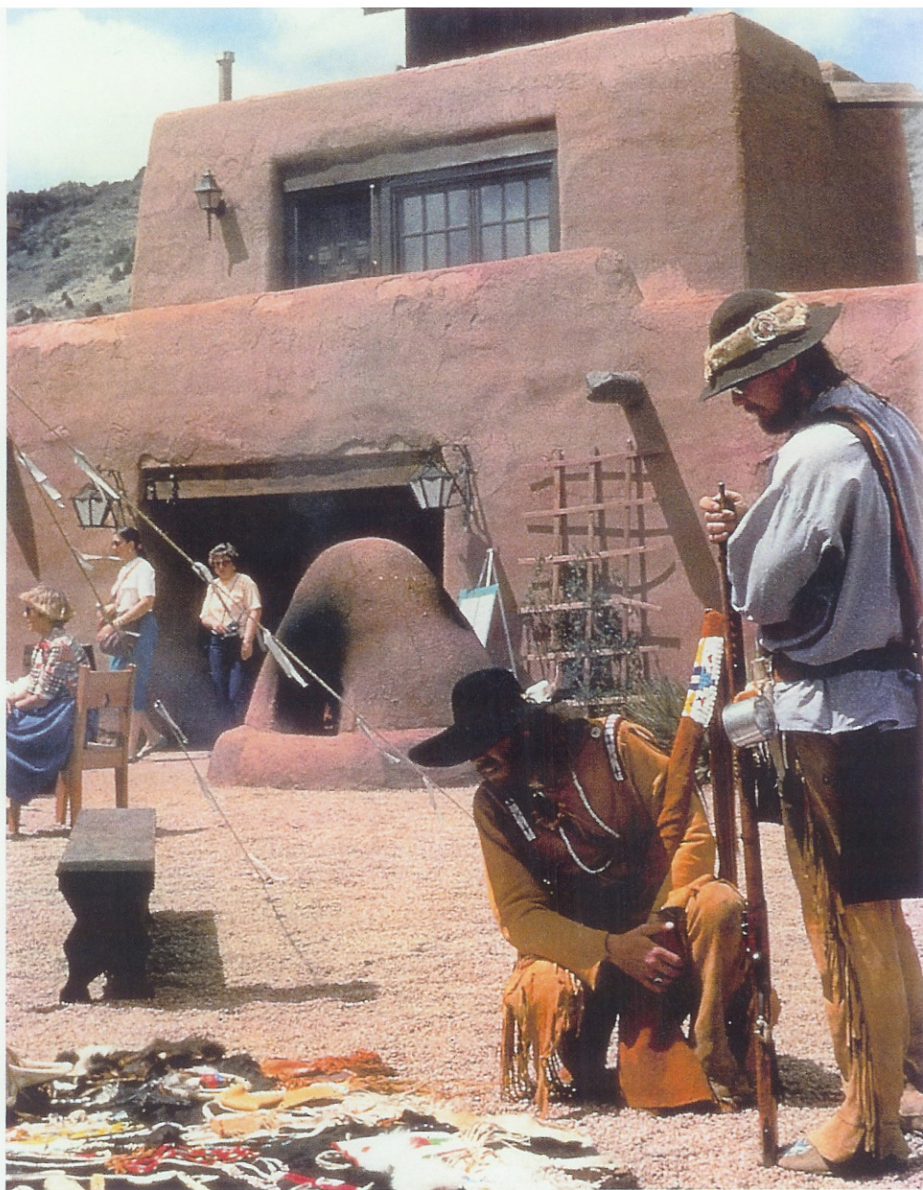
A blueprint based on the original design and materials guided the construction, which entailed making more than 80,000 mud bricks by hand. Slowly the new fort took shape, created to provide not only a business on the main level, but family living quarters above.

In addition to building a trading post, Arnold decided to work and live in the same place and open a restaurant, a bold new venture that would define the rest of his life.

Originally an Easterner and a graduate of Yale University, Arnold worked for newspapers and radio stations earlier in his career. Eventually he migrated to New Mexico, where he became a radio announcer. During that time, he developed a taste for Southwest foods ~ a love affair with chilies, unusual spices, and the colorful presentation that is so much a part of southwestern cuisine.

He also acquired his insatiable quest for knowledge about the West, which inspired his first two cookbooks, *Frying Pan West* (Pruett) and *Eating Up The Santa Fe Trail*, (University Press of Colorado.) The latter, an entertaining and informative anthology, is based entirely on diaries and journals kept by 19th-century settlers and was illustrated by his second wife Carrie, who was an accomplished artist.

Arnold's dream is still an exciting work in progress. Today's Fort is more than a culinary destination, it's a cultural hub. In October, The Fort hosts a Mountain Man Rendezvous, a two-day event that recaptures the



Photography by William Swartz

More than a restaurant, The Fort is frequently the setting for everything from mountain man rendezvous and powwows to lectures and seminars on western history and frontier lore.

ambiance and fun of 19th-century fur traders and mountain man sport.

In the Spring, it hosts a Native American Powow with competitions for costumes and drumming. Occasionally during the Summer, community volunteers are invited to help replaster the mud on The Fort's adobe walls.

Intimate historical dinners, framed by wonderful seminars and notable guest speakers, address the wealth of lore that surrounds the unusual cuisine. These are hosted by

Arnold and the Green River Scalping and Joy Society. Weekends often feature folk music. Groups can book cooking classes and private tours, and the trading post on site sells cookbooks and artifacts from the mountain man era.

The restaurant now boasts nine different dining rooms with a seating capacity of 350. Offices occupy one area and the previous sleeping quarters have been changed into a cozy suite reserved for guests who dare not brave an icy night.



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Sam Arnold "tomahawking" a bottle of vintage champagne for a newly engaged couple.

Although Arnold now lives in Denver, this second story hideaway is decorated with a remarkable collection of period antiques: a trunk once belonging to George Bent, a bundle of Canadian wolf pelts, a cast iron wood-burning stove from the 1840s, a one-shot Plains rifle, an 1834 Army officers' sword, a box of dueling pistols, and a ceramic tea pot and tea cozy from a settler's wagon.

Most amazing is the authenticated scabbard to the knife that decapitated the famous Espinosa Brothers, outlaws who terrorized the area around the Sangre de Christo Mountains in the mid 1800s and were hunted to their deaths by Tom Tobin, a relative of Kit Carson. The stories describing this room, and its treasures, are worth the trip alone.

Downstairs, the rich glow of waxed *salttillo* tile with painted insets add color and warmth to the floor. At night, bright kiva-style hearths and the lights of Denver, seen through spacious windows, sparkle in the dark. Outside on a flagstone

patio, an authentic military cannon, circa 1816, stands ready to announce weddings and other special occasions.

"Keeping the past alive is a full-time job at The Fort," quips Arnold, ever ready to activate the big gun or fire up the kitchen for a private celebration.

On the restaurant walls are numerous fine works of art ~ an impressive collection of Plains Indians ghost shirts, original sepia glass prints of Indian life dating from 1909, by photographer Edward S. Curtis, and a wonderful painting of The Fort by Carrie from the 1970s. Notable are prints from 1812 by Karl Bodmer, a Swiss artist who followed Lewis and Clark. Hand-crafted furniture by Antonio Archuleta of Taos, and fine rugs by David Ortega of Chimayo grace the dining rooms.

The restaurant's famous menu has been refined during the years from historical recipes converted to a highly original sampling of mountain man and Southwestern cookery, with

buffalo as its staple.

Unique offerings such as succulent bone marrow, roasted and served on toast, or buffler tongue and Rocky Mountain Oysters, are real crowd pleasers. For the less adventurous, a variety of game, fresh fish, unusual vegetables, and grains tempt the palate.

Historic beverages such as Bear's Blood, or the mint-laden Hailstorm, served in a lidded jar for serious shaking, are favorites. The now famous appetizer of buffalo eggs (hard-boiled quail eggs wrapped in sausage) were once served to the hosts of NBC's *Today Show* when they broadcast live from Denver.

Arnold's love for history and food has taken him far beyond the realm of restaurant management. His expertise links him to the growing food industries of Colorado.

His familiar sonorous voice, quick wit, and enthusiasm, introduced many a Coloradan to a sumptuous ingredient or recipe. In fact, an entire generation grew up with his



The cuisine at The Fort often takes its cue from early day mountain man fare, such as Buffalo Steak Gonzales.

warm and inimitable voice, on radio and television shows. He is also known for his famous mountain man greeting and farewell ~ "Waugh!" ~ an expression from an old mountain man toast.

The toast states: "Here's to the child's what's come afore 'an here's to the pilgrims what comes arter. May yer trails be free of grizzlies, yer packs filled with plews and fat buffler in your pot! Waugh!"

A popular speaker in the food industry nationwide, he is active in the Colorado Chapter of the American Institute of Wine and Food and the International Association of Culinary Professionals.

An intimate friend of noted food authority, Julia Child, Arnold confirms she comes closest to being his personal hero, adding, "She's the one person I know who is genuinely interested in other people."

Arnold's talents might best be expressed these days in the publishing world. His latest cookbook, *The Fort: A Cookbook* (Harper Collins) is a captivating read, filled with anecdotes about his own remarkable life as well as food history. The most compelling story might be that of the now legendary black bear, Sissy, who arrived at The Fort in 1962.

A well-intentioned gift from a friend, the cub was "adopted" by Lobo, the resident German Shepherd and soon grew to be like a member of the family. A rock cave

was blasted for her on the north side of The Fort and, though she grew to more than 500 pounds in adulthood, she lived a long and happy life behind a safe, wire fenced enclosure. Remarkably, documents from the real Bent's Fort also describe a resident bear, an uncanny coincidence.

Arnold's appetite for knowledge, travel, and the exchange of ideas is even greater than his appetite for cooking. In person, he is both worldly and down-to-earth, theatrical yet unpretentious, a man exuding a warmth of spirit and an easy confidence that bonds him instantly to a crowd.

Active in the Western History Association, he is a voracious reader, a professional *raconteur*, once appointed Colorado's official storyteller, an excellent photographer, and a lover of art and literature. He might be considered a kind of regional Renaissance man.

The Fort today is an institution on the move. Since the untimely passing of Arnold's wife and business partner, Carrie, in 1998, he has had to be the visionary on his own. But with his adult daughter Holly, now second in command, they've developed a talented staff to help take that vision further.

One of the recent programs at The Fort, held in honor of Women's History Month, introduced diners to the world and cuisine of Miss Susan Magoffin, a settler who kept a diary as she journeyed up the Santa Fe Trail in 1846. Restaurant guests could sample the same fare this young pioneer did. Such creative exploration explains why The Fort's menu is in a constant state of evolution.

"I believe in what has become known as 'Arnold's Law,' " he laughs. "To be successful, people have to eat what they like. So I give the public what it wants and keep myself from job burnout by creative experimentation. But after all, it's really about more than food.

"As America grows, our search for what's of value in



Buffalo Marrow Bones, served on toast.

the past will become more intense. I believe more and more people will seek out an image of America that used to be and isn't available anymore. I want people to experience the taste and textures of foods of the past."

One of the highlights in The Fort's recent history was hosting the Summit of the Eight, the meeting of global leaders led by President Bill Clinton in Denver in 1997. Although the ingredients for the dinner were procured from "secure sources," the menu and ambiance were the best Arnold had to offer.

"I'll never forget the huge limousine driving up to the courtyard of my restaurant that afternoon. I'd have to say I felt extremely proud when the President of the United States stepped out with his wife and said 'Hi, Sam,' and shook my hand. That was memorable."

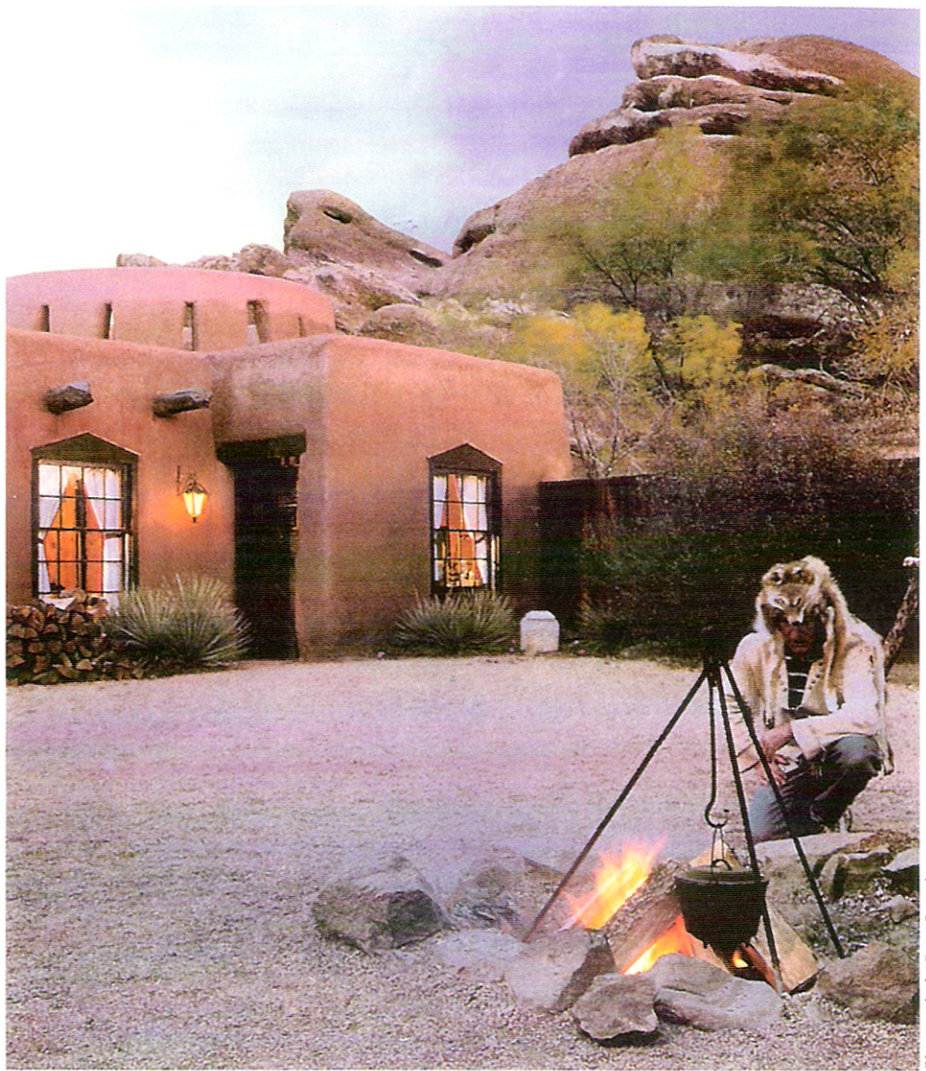
Just a few weeks after the Clintons' visit to The Fort, members of the museum's Prix de West Society also dined here while on their annual art-related trip to visit artists in the Denver, Loveland, and Fort Collins area.

As a footnote, Mikhail Gorbachov dined at The Fort in 1998, while visiting the United States. He confided to Arnold only here had he found the hearty, unpretentious food he loved and that was most like that of his native, rural Russia.

Along with the fanfare and celebrity hype that goes along with being Sam Arnold, one can find a quieter, more private individual, one who cherishes family, grandchildren, and personal dreams.

Arnold is an art collector with a world class assemblage of folk art and musical instruments and can actually play the banjo, mandolin, and the saw. He has created a foundation called *Tesoro* to identify masters of 19th-century arts, a way of keeping America's frontier era crafts alive.

The foundation also is in charge of expanding educational events, including lectures and rendezvous, in fact, anything that showcases Colorado



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A visitor, dressed in period mountain man attire, warms his hands by a fire on the grounds by The Fort.

history and artists. It's easy to see how Arnold's commitment to history is his *raison d'être* and appears to be the real theme behind how he lives his life.

In one corner of Arnold's colorful and eclectic living room, beneath a wall of New Mexico Santos and Hopi kachina dolls, sits a solid wood antique spinning wheel. This functional tool, as beautiful as any modern sculpture, belonged to Peter Arnold, Sam's grandfather. It was handed down to him from his grandfather who actually made it, emigrating to America from Germany and Switzerland in 1767.

Its simple lines and profile are a thing of beauty, but its mere pres-

ence serves to remind its inheritor to never forget the value of simple work, to cherish the handmade, and to never, ever forget the past.

And why not? On a larger scale, perhaps The Fort, itself a monument to Colorado's early way of life and the values of its owner, will no doubt serve Arnold's children and future generations in precisely the very same way. 🐾

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