



## D I N I N G

# Mexican Evolution

Jeff Smedstad gained acclaim for his take on Mexican cuisine at Los Sombreros in Scottsdale. Now he's doing the same thing at Elote Café in Sedona.

BY 6:15 ON A WEDNESDAY EVENING, ELOTE CAFÉ IS FULL, and the foyer is crowded with diners waiting to be seated. Some of them have come for the view — a floor-to-ceiling wall of glass and a small patio open to Sedona's famed red-rock formations. But most come for chef-owner Jeff Smedstad's unique take on Mexican food, particularly those who remember him as founding chef of the acclaimed Los Sombreros in Scottsdale.

Smedstad's style has its roots in the markets of Mexico. "I call it gussied-up market food," he says. Elote's smoked chicken enchiladas are a twist on enchiladas suiza, found in Mexico City. His lamb adobo was inspired by adobos he sampled on a road trip to Veracruz. "I add something to it, my style," Smedstad says. "But I try never to lose the soul of a dish."

The restaurant's name refers to corn on the cob — called *elotes* — sold on the streets in Mexico.

"I got that because I love corn," Smedstad says. "It's the most important ingredient when it comes to tortillas and tamales.

Corn masa is where it all starts."

Smedstad studied at the Scottsdale Culinary Institute, but drew inspiration from his travels throughout Mexico, particularly the time he spent in Oaxaca with Suzanna Trilling, who later founded the famous Seasons of My Heart cooking school.

"We went around to different ranches and cooked," Smedstad says. "That's where I learned to make molé. Not in a stainless-steel kitchen like this. I learned in the backyard with a metate, grinding the seeds by hand. It was a great experience. I'm big on roots."

Now Smedstad has returned to his own roots. After selling his stake in Los Sombreros to his ex-wife, Smedstad worked for a short time as executive chef for Sala in Atlanta, where he garnered good reviews. He came back when he heard the space at the King's Ransom Hotel was available.

"I flew out the next day," he says. "I just said this is going to work. I didn't even ask what the lease was."

Smedstad wondered if he made the right decision when he served only three customers on opening night. But word spread quickly, and now the restaurant is packed.

"It's good to be home," Smedstad says. "It's been exciting to find that people didn't forget about me."

■ *Elote Café is located at 771 Highway 179 in Sedona. For more information, call 928-203-0105 or visit [kingsransomsedona.com](http://kingsransomsedona.com).*

— Kathy Montgomery



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