

# The Ellsworth American.

## El El Frijoles Opens for a Second Season in Sargentville

*Written by Madeline Lewis*



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Garden Veggie Quesadillas are among the Mexican-style offerings served up at El El Frijoles, a play on L.L. Bean, in Sargentville.—PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHAEL ROSSNEY

At least twice a week, Lisa Arhontes-Marshall drives several miles from her house in Sedgwick to Sargentville. For this San Francisco native, getting a cheese, black beans, and rice filled burrito at El El Frijoles is like eating at home.

"A California girl has got to have her Mexican food," she says.

Since first-time owners Michael Rossney and Michele Levesque opened El El Frijoles in May 2007, crowds far beyond the restaurant's nine-seat capacity have lined up to munch on tacos and burritos brimming with Maine lobster, butter, garlic and a blend of Mexican spices called achiote paste.

After a successful debut last year, the restaurant plans to add a breakfast menu on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday mornings this summer. Currently, the seasonal restaurant is only open between 11 a.m. and 8 p.m. from Wednesday to Sunday.

Homegrown variations on traditional Guadalaran fare daily come out of Levesque's busy kitchen. El El Frijoles offers an assortment of ever-changing specials such as Thursday's artichoke heart and cream cheese empanadas. This allows Levesque to experiment with different ingredients from her own small garden, local farms, outdoor markets and bakeries.

"One of my best specials was a Swiss chard, zucchini and cheese quesadilla," she says, adding that she's eagerly observing the growth of the Swiss chard in her garden this year.

Levesque says she cooks for El El Frijoles the way she creates artwork. Both endeavors, she explains, are about process, order and repetition.

"Most of my work is process oriented," she says. "Once the idea comes to me there's multiple smaller pieces that need to be made to make the whole piece."

Art and cooking came together in Levesque's work when she was a graduate student at the University of California-Berkeley. She baked dozens of apple pies for friends in order to collect and string together more than 2,000 dried apple cores.

Diners can view examples of Levesques' artwork at the Coast to Coast Fine Arts Gallery next to the restaurant. The gallery puts on a different art show every two weeks during the summer.

Levesque first learned to make El El Frijoles' cuisine working alongside Mexicans in San Francisco Bay Area restaurants.

"It didn't matter what the ingredients were. They turned it into Mexican food somehow," she recalls.

Burritos and tacos became regular staples for Levesque and husband Rossney in California. At the time, he worked as a freelance photojournalist and she as an art teacher in a girl's school. The relatively inexpensive selections at Bay Area taquerias were affordable options for the pair.

In 2006, Rossney and Levesque decided to offer this cuisine to diners thousands of miles from the Mexican border. They bought a plot of land owned by Rossney's aunt and set to work opening El El Frijoles — a name that plays on Maine's famed outdoor outfitter L.L. Bean.

The move fulfilled a lifelong dream for Rossney, whose family has owned a house in Sargentville since 1905.

"I've been trying to figure out for most of my adult life how I can live here full time," he says.

Maine inspires his photography.

"It's just such a beautiful place," he says.

Both say their restaurant gives diners a different option in a region where pizza places and roadside seafood shacks dot the landscape.

They enjoy teaching diners unfamiliar with authentic Mexican food how to eat a real burrito. Don't completely unwrap the tinfoil around the burrito, they advise. That's just a recipe for disaster. Instead hold the burrito in one hand and then incrementally peel away the wrapping and pour salsa on the top.

Customer Jen Traub agrees that the restaurant offers something that she doesn't find at most area restaurants: more exciting vegetarian dishes beyond the standard green salad.

"Today, I had the special," says the East Blue Hill resident as she sips ice tea. "The corn empanadas, which were totally out of this world."

El El Frijoles is appealing, Traub adds, because Levesque and Rossney are welcoming and friendly. They don't insist customers leave after eating and paying the bill. They let diners leisurely finish their meals and stroll the green lawn surrounding the restaurant.

Traub enjoys going to El El Frijoles with her infant daughter Julia. The two eat lunch (though there's a kid's menu featuring peanut butter and jelly quesadillas and mini burritos, Julia usually nibbles on tortilla chips), walk around the grounds, and play in a sandbox.

"We've been here since 12:30," she says at 1:40 p.m. "And it feels like we could hang out here all afternoon."

This summer, Levesque might even make salsa verde with some tomatillos — small green tomatoes — grown in Traub's garden.

The tomatillos will be a welcome ingredient given that Levesque makes almost all the food served in El El Frijoles from scratch.

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