

Going Places Eastern New Mexico

STORY AND PHOTOS BY **TIM KELLER**



Generations mingle in the Roosevelt Brewing Company dining room, in Portales.

Sisterhood Is Plentiful

Sibling towns Portales and Clovis offer way more than peanuts: rock 'n' roll history, craft beer and cheese, mom-and-pop restaurants, and a boot shop as big as a rodeo arena.

Why Go Now

Two of New Mexico's county seats just 19 miles apart, Portales (Roosevelt County) and Clovis (Curry County) boast pleasant temperatures in the 50s in February and mid- to high 60s as March slides into spring. Portales is anchored by Eastern New Mexico University (ENMU), surrounded by miles and miles of picturesque dairies and peanut farms. Clovis is home to Cannon Air Force Base and is a regional hub for trains and cattle sales. Together, Portales and Clovis are a thriving outpost of southwestern agricultural

culture. When you arrive in Portales, more under-the-radar attractions include a bucolic B&B and a trio of bustling owner-run restaurants on the Portales courthouse square; in Clovis, discover a real-deal diner hidden away in the stockyards, a supersize boot shop, and a surprisingly robust 25-acre zoo. Don't miss Clovis's glittering municipal rock 'n' roll museum and Norman Petty Studios, where the Fireballs and Buddy Holly recorded their classics. At night, two-step to the old-school country songs of rising young star Will Banister at Kelley's.

THE ROUTE:

From Albuquerque, take **I-40 E.** 116 miles to **Santa Rosa.** Take **U.S. 84 S.** 42 miles to **Fort Sumner,** then **U.S. 60/84 E.** 37 miles to **Melrose.** Take **N.M. 267 S.** 32 miles to **Portales.** Turn right on **N. Avenue I,** then left on **W. 18th Street.** Turn right on **S. Avenue D (N.M. 206)** and find **Almost Home B&B** a few blocks S. on the right.

When you're ready to start the tour, take **N.M. 206** back to **W. 2nd Street.** Turn right and drive two blocks to the Portales courthouse square. **W. 2nd** becomes **U.S. 70** as you continue N. to Clovis. Returning to **Albuquerque** from Clovis, drive W. on **U.S. 60/84** to Melrose, then retrace the route through **Fort Sumner** and **Santa Rosa** to **I-40.**

Going Places Eastern New Mexico



Day 1: Portales Hospitality

Portales is an agricultural center surrounded by 40 dairies, a cheese factory, and peanut farms: It's the nation's largest producer of Valencia peanuts. Located right in town, ENMU is New Mexico's third-largest university; its nearly 6,000 students from 49 states and 17 countries add spice to the farm culture and a pronounced bustle to the downtown restaurants—themselves an insider's secret worth the trip. Native son Will Banister declines to base his career in Nashville because he loves this town so. "It's just home," he says. "I love the people. Anywhere you go, people are waving to you."

The area's only B&B, **Almost Home**, has a distinctly rural ambience, complete with red barn, tractor, and a pair of Arabian horses, all situated on the southern outskirts just two miles from the downtown square. Gary and Judy Piepkorn opened Almost Home in 2007, after Gary retired from 37 years as a chaplain in the Coast Guard, Air Force, and Navy. He grew up working on his family's Minnesota dairy farm; the orange Allis-Chalmers tractor was his grandfather's. Judy is a nurse, finishing her master's degree at ENMU, where Gary teaches in the religion department.

Almost Home's three immaculate rooms, a bargain at \$85 each, feature private entrances, queen beds, full baths, air-conditioning, abundant space and storage, flat-screen TVs with cable and DVD, coffeemakers, and farmland views. It's the perfect way to get out of town without giving up the amenities of home.

Judy serves breakfast in her big kitchen. "I like to be creative," she says, "and I use fresh local ingredients whenever I can." She serves only fresh, pure juices and is happy to accommodate

gluten-free diets, allergies, and vegetarians. Her Santa Fe Breakfast Bake combines eggs, corn, black beans, and hash browns, with or without meat. She was proud to mention that her New Mexico Corn Tea Muffin recipe came from *New Mexico Magazine*.

Vines is the region's most frequently recommended restaurant. Four years ago, Karyl and Mark Vigil converted the former hotel—the second-oldest building on the downtown Portales square—into an elegant bistro with low lights, intimate wooden booths, art, and flowers, perfect for a romantic lunch or dinner. A second dining area is more casual, although it features a magnificent tigerwood mahogany bar and back bar from the Palace Hotel on Ratón's historic First Street.

Vines' real draw, though, is the food. (Lunch and dinner menus are supplemented by specials posted daily on the restaurant's Facebook page.) Chef Adam Baca's recent offerings have included grilled swordfish over sweet potato polenta and black bean corn salsa, a bacon-wrapped sirloin with mushroom risotto and baked tomato, and a rib eye with pesto butter and asparagus. Simpler fare includes unique pizzas and pasta dishes. The green chile is local, roasted and peeled in the kitchen. Entrées are priced from \$8 to \$26 and include gluten-free and kids' menus.

Justin Cole is the latest in a long family line of zymurgists fermenting ales, whiskeys, and moonshine going back to Prohibition-era Big Stony Creek, Virginia. Born and raised in Clovis, he returned from college in Socorro to work for two years as bar manager at Vines before opening **Roosevelt Brewing Company** on the downtown Portales square



Clockwise from top left: A huge success since its opening day in December 2012, Roosevelt Brewing Company packs in happy diners with its creative menu of brick-oven pizzas and in-house beers and ales. Located on the downtown courthouse square in Portales, the Do Drop In has a folksy appearance but keeps current with an espresso bar, fresh-made pastries and cupcakes, and an extensive sandwich menu. Joe's Boot Shop, in Clovis, offers its own Dusty Rhodes Collection of custom-fitted hats, named for a family member and onetime hat creaser at the store.



Clockwise from top left: Joe's Boot Shop in Clovis keeps 16,000 pairs of boots in stock, as well as hats, Western wear, and Western-themed home furnishings, throughout the 37,000 square foot store. A zoo resident in Hillcrest Park, an oasis in the center of Clovis. Dakota's Steakhouse serves hearty fare, from chicken-fried steak to Navajo tacos.

between Vines and the Yam Theatre. He has a hit on his hands: The high-ceilinged dining area is packed day and night.

It's a charmed enterprise. Cole advertised for a chef and got Tyne Sansom, a French Canadian who grew up in Maine and came to Portales when his wife enrolled at ENMU. Both in their 20s, Cole and Sansom have a creative partnership that's spawned an exciting destination, with Cole's handcrafted ales and lagers complementing Sansom's kitchen creations. Using local farm-to-table ingredients—even the brewing yeast is grown locally—the regular menu features 15 specialty pies: pizzas with names like Dragon's Breath, the Buffalo, Panama, and Red Chile Enchilada, baked in a wood-fired oven alongside calzones, sandwiches, and specials, all priced \$6–\$12. Daily creations posted on Facebook include collaborations between chef and brewmaster, like Nut Brown Ale Red Chile Beef Stew and IPA Cupcakes. Live music at night adds to the bustle.

The **Do Drop In** is also located on the square's northeast corner. Espresso bar java accompanies homemade muffins, desserts, salads, daily soups, and specials. The menu offers 14 sandwiches, but the staff makes sandwiches to order, too. Students do homework while other patrons play board games. A cozy fireplace and eight flavors of ice cream offer more reasons to hang out.

Day 2: Clovis Sights

From Portales, take N.M. 467 north to reach Clovis via the Blackwater Draw Archaeological Site (closed November–March) and Oasis State Park (which offers a fishing pond and campsites), or zip straight up U.S. 70 to Clovis, passing peanut farms, dairies, and a cheese factory amid vast farmlands. Stop at the **Blackwater Draw Museum** for fascinating displays on local human activity going back 13,500 years—the oldest positively defined cultural group in North America, discovered in 1929. In Clovis, don't miss **Joe's Boot Shop**, where 16,000 pairs of cowboy boots share a 37,000-square-foot showroom with custom hats, western wear, and western home furnishings. Picnic under giant shade trees at 157-acre Hillcrest Park, home to an indoor swimming pool and aerobic workout center, botanical garden, and sports fields, then enjoy the compact but impressive **Hillcrest Park Zoo**.



Norman Petty's control room is much as he left it after recording hits by Buddy Holly, the Fireballs, and other pioneers of rock 'n' roll. Bands played and recorded in the next room while Petty watched through the glass.

We especially enjoyed the inquisitive giraffes, adorable bobcats, imposing Bengal tiger, and a trio of alligators.

From Hillcrest Park, follow irresistible grilling aromas to **Dakota's Steakhouse**, marked by a packed parking lot with a huge buffalo sculpture, just off busy Prince Street. Locally owned and run by Jim Clark and family, Dakota's draws lunch and dinner crowds for rib eyes, salmon, and catfish, along with other steaks, seafood, burgers, soups, and salads. Great servers handle food and crowds with smiles: We heard a waitress singing on her way to the kitchen.

Hidden away in the sale barn at the Clovis Livestock Auction—aka the stockyards—**Mom's Café** is a classic diner where folks eat in booths under black-and-white photographs of the stockyards when the phone numbers had three digits, circa 1930s–'40s. A jukebox offers old country music. The café serves breakfast from 5 o'clock and lunch until 2, and the menu has all the standards, including omelets, huevos rancheros, chicken-fried steaks, burgers, sandwiches, and Mexican plates. Myrle Rush bought Mom's years ago. Asked who Mom is, she smiles and says, "Right now, I am." Take the Hull Street bridge south over the railyard just west of downtown: Mom's is on the right.

Thanks to Norman and Vi Petty, rock music traces important bloodlines right to Clovis.

Norman Petty Recording Studios produced most of Buddy Holly's hits and others by Roy Orbison, Waylon Jennings, and New Mexico's own Fireballs, who became the house band. The studio, kitchen, and musicians' apartment are unchanged from their heyday, and available for morning tours by appointment. Clovis's downtown **Norman & Vi Petty Rock & Roll Museum** provides an equally fascinating immersion in stories and memorabilia from the explosion of rock 'n' roll that, because of one seminal recording studio, burst upon the world from right here in Clovis.

Time your visit to hit **Kelley's Bar & Grill** on a Wednesday or Friday night when Will Banister's band packs the place with dancers boot-scooting around the cornmeal-dusted wooden dance floor. [Enjoy our September 2012 story "Turning Everyone On to Country" at bit.ly/nmmcntry.] The food's great, too. Banister's voice and songs are so good that you could close your eyes and consider it a young Merle Haggard in concert. It's a show that will stay with you all the way home.

Tim Keller is featured in "Storytellers," p. 8.

NEED TO KNOW

PORTALES

Almost Home Bed & Breakfast 8168 N.M. 206; (575) 356-0011; almosthomebedandbreakfast.com

Blackwater Draw Archaeological Site Open April–October. N.M. 467, eight miles N. of Portales. (575) 356-5235; emmu.edu/blackwater-draw

Blackwater Draw Museum U.S. 70, seven miles N. of Portales; admission to both, \$3. (575) 562-2202; emmu.edu/blackwater-draw

Do Drop In 123 S. Main St.; (575) 226-5282; portalesjava.com

El Rancho Restaurant 101 S. Chicago Ave.; (575) 359-0098; on Facebook.

Roosevelt Brewing Company 201 S. Main St.; (575) 226-2739; rooseveltbrewing.com

Vines Italian Restaurant 107 W. 2nd St.; (575) 356-4525; vinesitalianrestaurant.com

Yam Theatre 219 S. Main St.; (575) 356-8541; portalesmainstreet.com/yamtheatre.html

CLOVIS

Dakota's Steakhouse 816 Lexington Rd.; (575) 935-3535; dakotasonline.com

Hillcrest Park Zoo 1201 Sycamore St.; (575) 769-7873; hillcrestparkzoo.com

Holiday Inn Express 4728 N. Prince St.; (575) 935-8777; hiexpress.com/portales

Joe's Boot Shop 2600 Mabry Dr.; (575) 763-3764; joesbootshop.com

Kelley's Bar & Grill 2208 N. Prince St.; (575) 762-0044

Mom's Café 504 S. Hull St.; (575) 763-5050

Norman & Vi Petty Rock & Roll Museum 105 E. Grand Ave.; (575) 763-3435; pettymuseum.com

Norman Petty Recording Studios Kenneth Broad, tours. 1313 W. 7th St.; (575) 356-6422

Oasis State Park Camping, fishing, hiking. 1891 Oasis Rd.; (575) 356-5331; emnrnrd.state.nm.us/spd/oasisstatepark.html