



story by **TINA DEINES**
photos by **DOUGLAS MERRIAM**

A Farmer's DREAM

Farming is in José Gonzalez's blood. After all, he's a third-generation farmer and started learning the ropes from his grandparents and mother at age 5. José and his wife María run Gonzalez Farms, a 12-year member of the Santa Fe Farmers' Market community. The pair won the Santa Fe Farmers' Market Institute's Farmer All Star award in 2015, an honor chosen by their peers. While José said the award made him "feel very good," he and María have even bigger dreams. They'd like to own their own land, a goal they're steadily working toward. But no dream comes without its challenges.

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As I pull up to the Gonzalez home, José—dressed in cowboy boots, a black cowboy hat and white button-down flamingo-adorned shirt—comes to greet me with a smile, while María helps gather extra chairs. Two curious children—8-year-old Mia and 5-year-old Dominic—join us for the interview, while 1-year-old Logan sleeps soundly through the whole thing.

“I love my work,” are José’s first words when I ask him to tell me a little about his farm, which produces a variety of crops including chile, squash, cucumbers, corn, potatoes, beans and sunflowers. María, who crafts and sells chile ristras and other decorative items using herbs and flowers, echoed that sentiment about her own efforts. She says she treasures having the opportunity to stay at home and care for her family while also working. In Spanish, she describes the process of making her chile crafts (crosses are her favorite thing to create). The key, she says, is working with the Sandia chiles—grown right on the farm by José—while they’re still fresh and pliable.

She learned the methods herself when she moved to the United States from Guanajuato, Mexico, 12 years ago with José. “She’s very smart,” José says, beaming proudly. “She just saw some at the farmers’ market and she learned.”

María had never seen anything like a chile ristra in Mexico, she says. “The first time I saw them, I thought that they were something to eat, but I found out they were decorations,” she laughs. She admits that her first chile ristra was a hard sell in the market community—she winces a bit as she describes how she had tried to sell it at the market for two weeks without any success. After that initial failure, she doubled down and improved her ristra-crafting skills. She says she labored for about a year to perfect her art. In addition to her chile ristras and crosses, María also creates flower decorations and sage animals like burros, a popular symbol of Mexican agriculture and a reminder of her heritage.

María says she’s inspired by many of New Mexico’s trademark cultural icons—buffalo dancers, kokopelli, sage and turquoise. “I like making a lot of different things,” she says, noting that if she weren’t making decorations, she might be working as a stylist or in another creative field.

José’s been involved in his craft—agriculture—since he was just 5 years old. In a small village in the Mexican state of Guanajuato, where he lived until coming to New Mexico with his mother and two brothers at age 9, he learned about farming from his grandparents and mother. “I grew up on a farm,” José says. “I remember watching my grandparents



in Guanajuato. At that time, we grew a lot of beans and corn.” But farming in New Mexico is a lot different than Guanajuato. There, he says, they depended entirely on rain with no irrigation or other water systems in place. Here in New Mexico, the Gonzalezes use acequia irrigation, which is becoming more and more difficult due to the current drought.

“It’s scary,” José says. “Right now, we’re OK with water, but we don’t know what’s going to happen this summer.” He also says the growing season is comparatively short in New Mexico. That’s why he and María want to build more greenhouses to help them harvest crops year-round.

In addition to the Santa Fe Farmers’ Market, the Gonzalez farm also sells at farmers’ markets in Taos and Los Alamos, as well as at the Eldorado Farmers’ Market in Santa Fe. “If we have a good season, we sell a lot to restaurants,” José says. “If it’s a bad season or not enough produce, we sell at just the markets.”

While the farm is not certified organic, José utilizes natural growing methods—no pesticides or chemicals. “Everything I use from seeds and soil is certified organic. No GMOs or pesticides,” he says. “I feel good because I know what my family’s eating and I don’t want to poison myself.” He also says his all-natural approach is a selling point with his customers, some of whom have been coming to him for years. “They trust us,” he says.

The family lives just far enough outside of Española to escape the hustle and bustle of city life. And José likes it that way. “I tried to move but I didn’t like the traffic and big buildings,” he says, smiling. José needn’t worry about that—out here, only a few dispersed neighbors, a quiet two-lane highway and the nearby Rio Grande speckle the landscape.

Currently, a small garden and greenhouse greet you as you enter the Gonzalez’s drive—oddly, this is the only hint of farming at a farmer’s home. That’s because the Gonzalezes rent two parcels of land totaling four acres about 20 minutes away from their residence. The couple dreams of one day buying their own land with a home onsite. But the Gonzalezes can’t purchase their land and home until they build enough credit to convince the banks to give them a loan.

“It’s kind of a big issue,” José says. “We just want to work harder to make it our own property and get our own place.” He says he’d love to reside in the Alcalde area, just a hop and a skip away from their current home, because the area benefits from easy access to the Rio Grande.



María

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According to Melissa Willis, program director for the Santa Fe Farmers' Market Institute, this problem isn't unique to the Gonzalez family. "Typically, banks won't even look at farmers when considering any type of loan," she says, explaining that banks consider farming a "high-risk business." Crop yields are dependent on weather—rain (or lack thereof), temperatures, wind. Add to that the cash-based economy of the profession, which makes it nearly impossible to build credit, she says.

The Santa Fe Farmers' Market Institute offers a way for small farmers to build their credit and their business by offering low-interest microloans to farmers like José and Maria, who have been taking advantage of the program since 2014. In addition, borrowers benefit from access to other tools like financial counseling, thanks to a partnership with Guadalupe Credit Union. "Not only have we helped them build their credit," Melissa says, "but we're giving them access to other resources that will hopefully help them get their land."

"It's a good opportunity," José says. "Sometimes, we don't have enough money left to buy seeds. And we're building credit, too." According to Melissa, the Gonzalezes are the perfect candidates for the microloan program, not to mention a positive force in the community. "They show up to almost every market we have," she says. "They always have smiles on their faces."

For now, it's a slow and steady climb toward their dream. In the meantime, the Gonzalezes will keep doing what they love—growing food, making chile decorations and interacting with their customers.

As I leave, José has one more project he'd like to tell me about. He points to an old postal truck in the corner of his property. With a grin, he says he wants to convert the truck—which he found online—into the Gonzalez Farms Taco Truck. But kitchen equipment is expensive and project taco truck might take a while to get off the ground. "It needs a lot of work," he laughs.