

Local Flavor

ALLAN AFFELDT
BELIEVING IN Our Past



JULY 2019

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Believing In Our Past

ALLAN AFFELDT & LAS VEGAS, LAMY, WINSLOW...

story by LYNN CLINE
photos by DOUGLAS MERRIAM

It requires a rare vision to bring history back to life, restoring treasured pieces of the past to their full glory. It's a sixth sense really, and it has guided entrepreneur Allan Affeldt on a remarkable journey, restoring abandoned hotels that once stood as magnificent symbols of America's mighty railroad era. Along the way, he has helped revitalize communities, transforming people and places with his visionary projects.

"There are beautiful things everywhere that need to be saved," Allan says in a recent interview. "In every case, someone has to take a leap of faith." Allan took his first leap of faith in Winslow, Ariz., restoring La Posada, the last great American railroad hotel, designed for the Fred Harvey Company by pioneering architect Mary Colter. As Fred Harvey's principal designer, Colter created La Posada in the style of a grand hacienda, with lush gardens, secluded courtyards and gorgeous public spaces adorned with antiques. In operation from 1930 to 1957, La Posada drew some of the biggest luminaries of the day, from Clark Gable and Carole Lombard to Howard Hughes, Amelia Earhart, Albert Einstein and many others.

After La Posada closed, the building fell into disrepair, ending up on the National Trust for Historic Preservation's endangered list, where Allan discovered it and decided to try and save it from the wrecking ball. In 1993, he put aside the dissertation he was writing on cognitive science at the University of California, Irvine and he and his wife, artist Tina Mion, drove to Winslow, where they found their future.

"It was Mary Colter's masterpiece and it was about to be torn down," Allan says. "For me, it wasn't about the railroad or Fred Harvey. It was about saving La Posada, the most important building of America's most important woman architect.... The building itself was so achingly beautiful. It was like a temple that had been desecrated. The railroad had gutted the building, and turned it into offices. You could tell, though, in the same way that someone who reads poetry for 20 years recognizes a poem. You could see what it was. You could see what it could be."

And so Allan purchased La Posada, an 80,000-square-foot hotel on 20 acres, for \$156,000—just the cost of the land—from the Santa Fe Railway. He devoted three years to working out the financial, legal and environmental hurdles to his \$12-million plan to restore Colter's majestic hotel. In 1997, he and Tina moved in to the Winslow hotel and re-opened its doors to the public. Today, the historic property is considered one of America's most beautiful hotels. The Turquoise Room, the hotel's revered restaurant run by renowned Chef John Sharpe, takes its name from the private dining car Colter designed for the Super Chief in 1936.

Allan's second leap of faith landed him in Las Vegas, N.M., the home of La Castañeda, the first trackside hotel for the Fred Harvey Company and the site of the 1899 reunion of Teddy Roosevelt and the Rough Riders after the Spanish-American War. The luxurious Mission Revival-style mansion, the only property designed by renowned Pasadena architect Frederick Roehrig for the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway, opened in 1899. The 40,000-square-foot hotel and restaurant, the prototype of almost every Harvey House built thereafter, closed in 1948 and then quickly declined. Despite the hotel's dilapidated state, Allan saw a national treasure.

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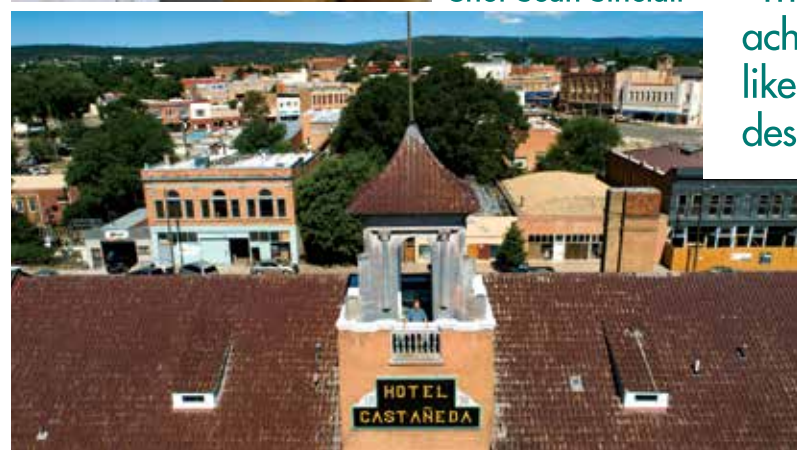


Allan Affeldt

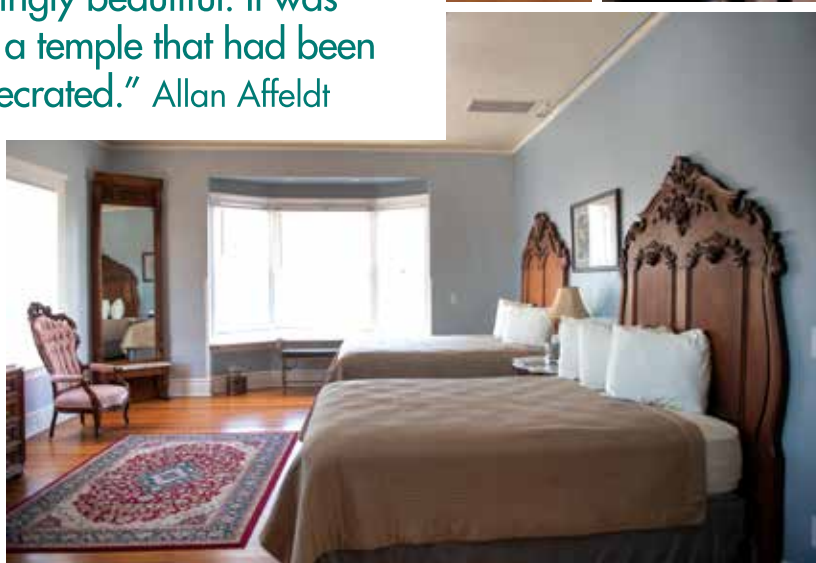




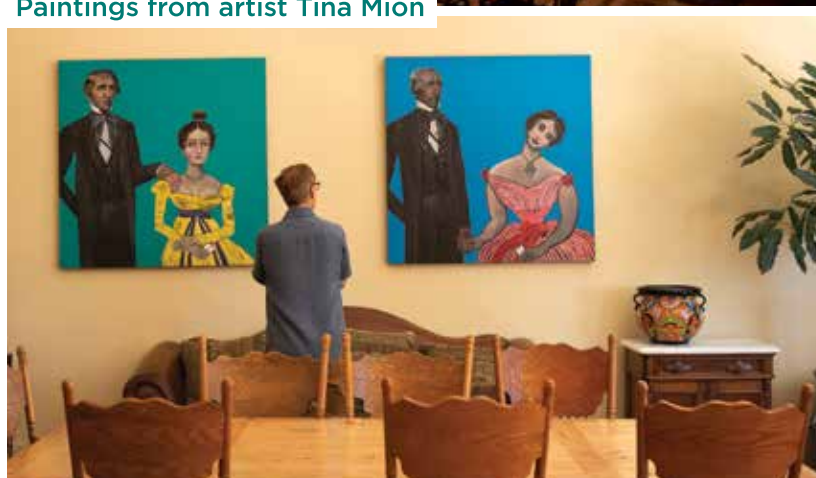
Chef Sean Sinclair



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Paintings from artist Tina Mion



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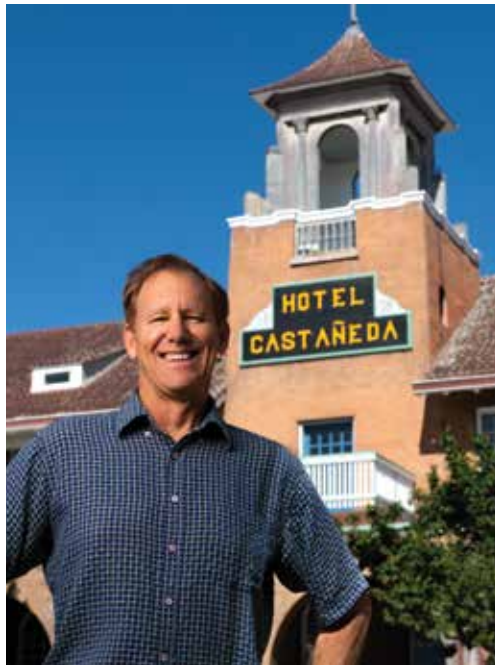
“Tina and I came out to Las Vegas in 2000 to see the Castañeda and Montezuma,” Allan recalls. “Las Vegas was the only place with two remaining Harvey hotels.” The Montezuma Hotel, which opened in 1882, became part of United World College in 1981. But the Castañeda was then owned by a local couple who ran it as a bar and were trying to sell the rundown property for \$2.5 million. Many phone calls with the owners’ realtor took place across a full decade before Allan and Tina were able to purchase the hotel for \$450,000. They then spent \$5 million restoring the hotel with a team of 50 local artisans, opening it as the Castaneda this April, complete with a handsome historic saloon and a restaurant, Kin, helmed by acclaimed Chef Sean Sinclair. “It’s the only project ever in New Mexico to receive historic and new markets tax credits,” Allan says. “It was very complicated. Just the financing took three years.”

The day after the Castaneda deal closed on April 8, 2014, locals turned out to celebrate and to shake Allan’s hand in gratitude, according to an Associated Press story. Some people declared Allan’s purchase and plans to restore the old hotel as the best thing to happen to this old Wild West town. Allan is on track to prove them right, having also purchased the Plaza Hotel—known as the Belle of the Southwest when it opened in 1882—and restored it to rightful splendor. The Plaza Hotel’s restaurant is one of Albuquerque’s landmark Range Cafés, now with six locations across New Mexico.

“With the Plaza and the Castaneda, here’s this incredible historical legacy and nobody knows about it,” Allan says. “Las Vegas had a poor reputation in the ‘70s and ‘80s, but it has an authenticity that has gone in so many places. People in New Mexico didn’t know about the Las Vegas legacy. They didn’t know the Castañeda was a great hotel or that Montezuma was the greatest hot springs resort in the West. By saving the Castañeda and revitalizing the Plaza Hotel, we hope to restore the reputation of the town.”

So how did a graduate student in semantics end up with a passion for historic preservation and reviving struggling communities? “I was always interested in architecture,” Allan says. “Design was my thing. I grew up in Orange County in Southern California. My father was in the tile business. We always had Architectural Digest around, and it was one of the things I enjoyed reading.” Allan also had an interest in international relations and enjoyed a vibrant career as co-producer with Bill Graham of Moscow’s Concert for Peace in 1987, and of international peace walks to end the Cold War. It was during one of those peace walks, in the Ukraine, that he met his American wife.

Today, Allan and Tina collaborate and consult, selecting colors and making other design decisions for their hotels. Tina’s oil paintings are permanently displayed at La Posada, Castaneda and the Plaza Hotel, as well as in collections around the world, including the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C.



The couple makes their home in Sedona, Ariz., but Tina has a studio in Winslow, and will soon have one in Castaneda, and they also have residences in La Posada and the Plaza Hotel.

Allan juggles many components with his work—raising money, negotiating bureaucratic labyrinths, dealing with the complexity of construction and reviving railroad towns. “These buildings were the center of their communities,” he says. “When La Posada closed down, in an important way so did Winslow, because it lost its sense of place,

lost its heritage, lost its pride. By the time we got there, it was an abandoned railroad town. Before Tina and I came to see it, we had looked at pictures of Colter’s work and La Posada was by far her greatest. After 20 years, we’re still making improvements. Last year, we renovated the train station and added on to it as an art and history complex.”

To aid in Winslow’s revival, Allan bought and restored the town’s old movie theater and even ran for mayor. He was elected not once, but twice. Broader change came as investors began

buying downtown properties and fixing them up. In New Mexico, Allan is expanding to other railroad towns, buying the historic Legal Tender Saloon in Lamy. Cafe Fina’s Murphy O’Brien and his nephew Rory O’Brien will run the soon-to-open restaurant and plans are afoot to bring back railroad service to Lamy from Santa Fe. Each of Allan’s projects are designed around a love for rail travel in these overlooked towns and an enthusiasm for America’s past.

“It’s historic revival,” Allan says. “It’s economic development. If you don’t have a business model for restoring these buildings, they’re just going to fail again. It’s aesthetics on a fundamental level. The most significant contribution we can make in the Southwest is tying these railroad towns together. We want to give people an authentic experience of the great railroad era. At the turn of the 19th century, the railroads were the biggest business in the country. Nobody from our generation ever really experienced that. There are these testaments to commerce, like the railyards in Albuquerque—a commercial industrial space that even now, as a magnificent ruin, is a temple of light. What we know from La Posada is that there is a business model and we can save these buildings and, in a really fundamental way, we can save these communities.”

Regarding the accent on “La Castañeda:” The original hotel name included the tilda accent over the “n.” Allan isn’t continuing that, and his hotel is called Castaneda, so no “La” or “the” before the name either, though his website isn’t consistent with this. We included the accent in the story when the original hotel was referenced, and didn’t include it in the new hotel’s name.

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