

# Desert Exposure

March 2005



## Features

### Wine Country Safari

A 3-day food and wine odyssey through California's Sonoma County proves you can have too much of a good thing.

### Crying Fowl

Clawing toward the truth about cockfighting, New Mexico's dark "heritage" that refuses to die.

By Jeff Berg

### Crying Fowl

Clawing toward the truth about cockfighting.

Chaparral, NM, is not a town, village, city or suburb. It is hard to label a place like this, because it doesn't look like much. There is no "downtown"; there are no shops, no franchise outlets, and no real post office.

### My Cockfighting Career

An accidental "cocker" remembers his brief life in the pits.

Having lived or worked on several American Indian Nations, I find in Chaparral some of the same feelings that I got from the poverty and despair that can embrace the Native peoples.

### Living History

Richard Dean's great-grandfather was killed in Pancho Villa's historic raid on Columbus, 89 years ago this month.

### Rocks in Their Heads

The 40th annual Rockhound Roundup, March 10-13, will draw thousands of collectors to Deming.

Chaparral consists mostly of mobile homes, and if I were a

tornado, I would be licking my chops to come through here. There are a few businesses thrown into the mix. A couple of convenience stores, a grocery store, and lots of auto repair places and mini junkyards. Tall chain-link fences surround many of them, and on this Sunday, they are sealed up tight. The desert area that Chaparral has destroyed looks and feels exhausted and defeated.

### A Journey Through Time

The old trail the Spanish called El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro offers new opportunities for tourism.

Several churches that dot the landscape and a couple of beautiful new schools, also made inaccessible after-hours by fences, offer the only sign of hope in the whole area.



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Spray painting is apparently something that brings great joy to some of the local residents or visitors, as nearly every solid wall and sign (including those of the churches) is covered with the idiocy that only a "tagger" would appreciate or understand. Trash is strewn or blown everywhere. Junk permeates some of the yards of the mobile homes. A "for rent" sign stands in front of one of these trailer houses, which comes complete with its own heap of old tires and other garbage haphazardly tossed into a side yard.

An oddly shaped dome-type home seems out of place, as do many of the permanent structures, including some new non-mobile homes that are sprinkled throughout.

In a word, Chaparral is ugly.

But it has one advantage. This rural community happens to straddle the invisible line between Otero and Dona Ana counties. Thus, in parts of Chaparral, the Otero County part, the "sport" of cockfighting is legal.

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### About the Cover

#### Red or Green?

Desert Exposure's

quarterly

dining guide.

I have come here this Sunday to look for one of the two cockfighting pits that were mentioned in a recent *Albuquerque Journal* article, to which the reporter for that publication, Kate Nash, was denied entry. *The New York Times* published an article about cockfighting this past December, wherein a reporter tried to visit the "Gentleman's Arena Game Club," located south of Socorro. He was not allowed to enter the pit, which had been recently rebuilt after a mysterious fire destroyed it a year or so ago.

I don't expect to fare any better, and especially feel that way after numerous queries add nothing to the possibility that I will get to watch an actual match. No one knows anything, quite possibly since it is the legislative session, and as usual, cockfighting has nabbed a number of headlines.

The standard and stock answers from cockfighters all circle back to the same thing: Why don't you (reporters and those seeking to ban cockfighting) mind your own business?

As I drive around Chaparral, I look for any gathering of cars or any other indication that I might be on the right track. The most cars I see are at a Baptist Church and at a Kingdom Hall, the place of worship for Jehovah's Witnesses. A different type of battle takes place in those arenas.

Although I drive a nondescript Honda, I feel like I am being "watched" by every car that passes by. This is an odd place, and I do not like the energy that I am feeling.

As I drive down Lisa Drive, I pass one rundown trailer home that has a number of dogs staked out in the surrounding patch of land that cannot be called a yard. Every 20 or so yards, there is another dog chained to an iron stake in front of a small doghouse. I do not get an official count, but there must have been seven to 10 dogs in this small space. What a glorious life for a pet to lead, especially when one wonders if these unloved animals are used for dogfights, or some other lowbrow human "amusement."

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I drive down many side streets, back and forth between NM Hwy. 213, and US Hwy. 54. I cruise Stateline Road, and am surprised to come across a pleasant-looking restaurant, called the Edge of Texas, just over the state line. It is near one of the Bowen Ranch headquarters, an enormous ranch that I have seen signs for all over this two-state area, and just south of a weary-looking place with a lighted sign that says:

The Last Round Up

Bill and Sue

BEER

I am getting restless and decide to head back to Las Cruces to make some more inquiries about where to look. The list that I received from the Animal Protection Voters organization in Albuquerque lists several other pits, but most of them are on the eastern side of the state, which must still consider itself a "frontier." A lead on another pit, supposedly near the Arizona state line, south of Lordsburg, has not panned out as being a "for sure" place.

I decide to make one last sweep down County Line Road. As I head north on the rural lane, I notice something out of the corner of my eye.

One of the modular homes, which sits on the Otero County side of the road, has a number of farm-type critters residing by it--a horse, a couple of goats. Looking closer as I slowly drive by, I find what I am looking for: Also at this residence are a number of small shelters, each with a rooster staked out in front of it. A number of the shelters, which look like tiny bus-stop sheds, are made from old steel barrels that have been creatively cut, allowing for a small amount of protection for each bird. Others look like a piece of cloth has been attached to some curved wire that looks like a fat croquet hoop stuck in the ground.

I turn around to drive by again, and as I turn down the side street, I espy what almost certainly has to be a cockfighting pit. The word "Otero" is crudely lettered on a sign above the entrance. I cannot read the other words on the sign from this distance.

But, damn it, there is nothing going on. I had read that most pits operate all weekend long, but this one is idle. I drive by the house with the birds staked out in front, but decide not to stop and try to visit with the owners.

For an activity that is "legal" and "cultural," it does not seem prudent to disturb the probable cockers (as they are called in the fighting world), and I must admit, I feel a mixture of anger and arrogance, tempered with a bit of anxiety.

**Cockfighting, as most readers probably know**, is legal in only two of the 50 states, with Louisiana being the other. Voters in Oklahoma, the other holdout, passed a ban in 2002. In spite of this, it is still a huge industry around the country, and game fowl breeders exist in many states.

The United Game Fowl Breeders Web site at [www.pitmaster.com/ugba](http://www.pitmaster.com/ugba) ("Remember UGBA starts with 'U'") contains a list of breeders and such, along with this mission statement:

"The purpose of this Association is to bind breeders and fanciers of game fowl into an organization for their mutual benefit and for the exchange of better methods and ideas tending toward perpetuation and improvement of the various breeds of game fowl and also to improve marketing methods and to cooperate with Universities, State, Federal and any other public or private agency which seek to control poultry diseases."

My priggishness is hard to hide as I read this several times to make sure I see what I see.

Elle Choate, head of Dona Ana County Animal Control, says, "We hear about it (cockfighting) a lot, but in my eight years at this job, we have only been successful in stopping a fight twice. Mostly what we find are the bags of dumped bodies. Many times, there will be some that are still alive that are tossed out with the dead ones. We usually just deal with the aftermath of it.

"We also find blades and other contraband, but I have never seen them sold around Las Cruces," she goes on. "The local feed stores carry magazines with ads that sell the blades and other supplies."

Choate says she raises chickens herself and so has seen roosters naturally sparring. "It is true that they will attack one another, but they are not relentless," she says. "That is not their normal behavior. These birds are born to die, and used just for sport, never as food."

The Humane Society of the United States' fact sheet on cockfighting at [www.hsus.org](http://www.hsus.org) says, "While it is true that birds will fight over food, territory, or mates, such fights are generally only to establish dominance within a group (the pecking order) and seldom result in serious injury. This natural behavior is quite different from what happens in staged cockfights, where pairs of birds, bred for maximum aggressiveness (and sometimes given steroids or other drugs to make them more successful fighters) are forced to fight until a winner is declared."

What about the often-heard defense that cockfighting is part of New Mexico's Hispanic heritage (70 percent of cockers are Hispanic, according to one defender)? Choate says, "The claims of it being a cultural issue are odd, since most of the complaints we get come from Hispanic people. But I think these people (complainants) understand the origin (of cockfighting), and the people that call us understand that these birds have nerve endings and feel pain, and they don't understand the need for causing an animal pain."

The Humane Society argues, "While it is true that cockfighting has been practiced for centuries in various countries, including the United States, 'old' does not necessarily mean right or even acceptable. At one time the United States allowed slavery, lacked child abuse laws, and refused women the vote."

Chris Jaramillo, registered lobbyist for the New Mexico Game Fowl Association (NMGFA), says, "Under the terms of my contract with NMGFA, I am not allowed to discuss or release information about the organization. But personally, I do feel that these people are good-hearted, and want to be left alone. People who criticize them do not know about the culture or the way of life."

Cockfighting is already banned in 13 New Mexico counties, including Dona Ana and Grant, and in 29 cities, including Deming, Las Cruces, Lordsburg, Silver City and T or C. Bills to ban cockfighting statewide were introduced in the legislature but failed in 2000, 2001 and 2003.

The 2003 effort died in the Senate Conservation Committee by a narrow 5-4 vote. In testimony on the measure, Janine Arvizu of Tijeras, described by the *Albuquerque Journal* as "a scientist and supporter of cockfighting," testified that watching cockfighting causes less emotional stress on children than a college basketball game: "My child is safer at an organized cockfight than she is at a (New Mexico) Lobo basketball game."

At press time, the Senate Conservation Committee had again bottled up a cockfighting ban, SB 65, sponsored by Sen. Mary Jane M. Garcia, a Dona Ana County Democrat, along with a similar measure, SB66. Among those voting to table the proposed bans was Sen. Ben Altamirano of Silver City. A House version, HB878, which would make it a fourth-degree felony to participate in or attend a cockfight, was narrowly handed off from the House Agriculture and Water Resources Committee, with no recommendation, to the House Judiciary Committee. On Feb. 24, that committee quietly voted, 6-0, to send the ban to a hearing by the full House in early March. Given the Senate's stance, however, prospects for passage seemed gloomy.

Celebrity support for a ban on New Mexico cockfighting has ranged from "Golden Girl" Rue McClanahan to pinup girl Pamela Anderson. Hollywood filmmakers were recently urged to boycott New Mexico unless cockfighting is banned here. Actor Wilfred Brimley was among those defending cockfighting.

Says Choate, "Every year when this bill (a cockfighting ban) comes up in the state legislature, I always hope that the bill passes."

**It was during a family vacation** to Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, with his parents that Hans Rosenwinkel, an assistant professor at the University of Idaho-Moscow, first witnessed a cockfight. Rosenwinkel, who has an interest in documentary filmmaking, teaches courses in mass media, television and radio production. His interest in cockfighting piqued by that accidental encounter, he later made a short documentary film for a National Geographic Channel show called "On Assignment." The film, "Blood Sport: Cockfighting in Mexico," aired in the spring of 2004.

Rosenwinkel shot the film in two weeks in and around the villages of Bucerias and El Tuito, Mexico, back in January of last year. Most towns in that area of Mexico have their own local festivals, and most of them have cockfighting

extravaganzas, he explains. The fights are only legal in arenas, he says, where the police leave them alone.

"The sport is illegal away from the arenas, and the police do go after the backstreet matches," Rosenwinkel says. "There is a lot of high-stakes gambling that goes on, and it is amazing how crazy the crowds got. Sometimes, since the arenas are only supposed to be open until 1 or 2 in the morning, the cops were paid off, and they would then leave the people at the arena alone. The cockfighters wanted to go until they were done.

"There was a carnival feeling about it because of the cheers of the crowd. And alcohol flows freely."

Rosenwinkel says that the matches he watched were the best of seven, and the fighters would play the full seven rounds, even if they had already lost. "They were all fights to the death."

The *federales* Rosenwinkel encountered were so corrupt, he says, that they were more concerned about busting the illegal cockfights than they were the drug houses that seemed to be in abundance. "The drug houses were brick buildings with steel doors. The cops knew to leave them alone, and went after the cockfights because of the gambling involved."

Sometimes the bettors at the fights would work in teams. Rosenwinkel says that he watched as one team lost \$20,000 (US) in just one night.

Rosenwinkel met a breeder named Juan Tirado, who agreed to allow the filmmaker to follow him to some fights. Tirado's roosters were apparently well-trained, as opposed to those who fight on the alleys and in the backstreet fights, who usually have lesser-trained birds. Tirado had 40-50 birds by Rosenwinkel's estimate.

"Juan won all of his fights when we were filming him," Rosenwinkel says. "We learned some of the philosophy and cultural aspects of cockfighting while filming. I developed somewhat of an understanding of the cockfighters' point of view. It was like the birds were fighting on a field of honor--like soldiers dying. The men would hold and cradle the birds, and then give them a chance to fight to the death--to die with honor.

"They train the birds like a fighter, like in the movie *Rocky*. This is a cockfighting version of *Rocky*."

Although Rosenwinkel is somewhat in favor of animal rights, and still is against cockfighting personally, he feels he gained a certain respect and understanding of the cultural nature of the activity while in Mexico. "I do see it as a cultural thing," he says.

**An article by Pattrice Jones** of the Eastern Shore Sanctuary (ESS) of Princess Anne, Md., notes the following: "Perhaps because of their evolutionary role as sentries and guardians of the flock, roosters tend to be highly sensitive and responsive to danger. With few exceptions, roosters fight because they are

afraid (like most creatures do), not because they are naturally aggressive. In the wild, male jungle fowl squabble over pecking order and territory, but do not injure one another seriously. Cockfighting perverts this natural and honorable behavior of the rooster into a parody of human masculinity. The fighting cock fights only because he is traumatized and terrified."

Jones and other staff members of ESS run a sanctuary for rescued chickens and roosters, using methods such as rewards of food, socializing and human touch to rehabilitate the rescued creatures that have been brought to them (see [www.bravebirds.org](http://www.bravebirds.org)).

Barbara Barron (no relation to Ronald Barron, the NMGFA President), who was married to a cockfighter for 42 years, lives in Carlsbad, NM. They divorced, but not because of this issue, and he has since passed away. Now remarried to Lyle Barron, a retired Colorado attorney and current freelance writer, she has a lot to say about the process used in training the roosters.

"My ex-husband was a native New Mexican, but only got into it (cockfighting) when we lived in Michigan," Barron says. "He met a bunch of fighters from Tennessee, and that was the beginning of it."

"It's all about money. I remember him coming home after one derby with a big paper grocery bag full of money. He couldn't wait to show it off to me."

In a recent letter to the editor in the *Albuquerque Journal*, Barron describes part of the process of how a bird is made into a fighter. In her letter, she speaks of "culling," where chicks are held upside-down by their legs: "The way the chicks respond determines whether they are male or female. The heads are pulled off female chicks. If there is room on the farm, and if the breeder is so inclined, they may let them live a few more weeks then kill them as fryers.

"Second, the stags (young cocks) are put on the yard together. As they mature and begin to show aggressive behavior, they are separated and 'tied out' separate from other cocks." The birds I saw in Chaparral are probably at this stage.

Barron's letter continues, "Third, at some time in their adolescence, they are 'sparred.' Muffs are attached to their natural spurs and handlers thrust them together until they are fully focused on one another. The feathers around their necks stand straight out and they fully extend their heads as they prepare to attack. The handlers then place them on the ground and watch them go to battle. If one 'runs' even after 'showing,' he is considered a 'dunkie' and will be killed. If he 'shows,' he is 'trimmed.' The stag's head is held securely and his comb and wattles are cut off with scissors.

"Fourth, the stags are then staked out. They cannot reach each other. They are fed special feeds and watched carefully."

Like a calf that receives special treatment and a unique diet only to be later served as veal, roosters raised as game fowl also get a few perks before being sent off to do their deeds. A special diet, usually high in vitamins and protein, is provided, and they receive a lot of exercise. It is also reported that some

trainers use massage. Coupled with this are disadvantages, such as steroid use or injection, and having their crowns sliced off when they are about a year old, thus eliminating a possible gripping place for a future opponent. And, of course, a short, violent life, with a painful death.

Eventually the day comes when the birds are taken to pits. Barron describes it: "In preparation for the pit, the unknowing gladiators are fitted with 'gaffs,' metal spurs attached to their sawed-off natural spurs. Gaffs are used because it would take too long for cocks to fight to the death using only their natural spurs. Cockfighters don't want the battle to be any longer than it takes to kill or severely injure one or both. (I always wondered if they would try to run if they knew they were bested by their foe. That would seem to be what they'd do in the wild.)"

After further detailing the process, Barron tells me about the birds being "on point," meaning that they are fully drugged and ready to fight. She also describes the death of birds who survive a fight in a "drag" pit, which is where exhausted or injured birds are paired to fight until one or the other just can no longer fight: "They hold the bird by the feet, put its head on the ground, and pull the head off by stepping on it."

This, of course, is achieved by tugging on the bird's legs while stepping on its head.

"The cockfighters don't want someone else to pick up a bird that is still living in case it could be used as a future breeder," she explains.

Her letter to the editor continues: "After trying to be a 'good sport' at cockfights, I set up a food concession and sold beans and sandwiches and avoided witnessing the actual cockfights as much as I could. I just couldn't take it any more.

"If cockfighting is a source of cultural pride, it should be widely advertised in New Mexico. It should be promoted as a tourist attraction. If cockfighting remains a legal blood sport because people are winning a lot of money, it should be banned."

She emphasizes this ironic point again to me: "If the activity is legal, then it should be advertised as so. Maybe the state could put up billboards, or have pits built at the gambling casinos."

Barron ends our conversation by saying, "Please call me if you have more questions. I will do anything that I can to make cockfighting illegal."

Lyle Barron scoffs at the breeders' and fighters' claims that the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, a document he has studied the legalities of, "protects" their right to partake in cockfighting.

"Cockfighters justify this activity by making reference to the treaty," says the retired attorney. "But the treaty only covers the rights to retain businesses, homesteads and lifestyles. State Attorney General Patricia Madrid has come up with the same results."

**I return to Chaparral just before Valentine's Day.** Nothing looks different except many of the streets are partially flooded from the recent heavy rains. I have confirmed through reporter Nash of the *Journal*, and a couple of other sources, that the aforementioned site is indeed a cockfighting arena.

I drive by the staked-out dogs, and turn on to County Line Road. Still unsure of how to proceed, I drive by the house that has the roosters in the yard, and the *palenque* (pit) next door several times, trying to decide what my intuition says about this. There are several people in the yard, two or three men and a woman. A large furry white dog accompanies them. I decide to stop and try to visit with the people, but as I slow down to pull over, I see that one of the men, heavy set, perhaps age 30 or so, with a baseball cap pulled low over his eyes, looks somewhat agitated. He is yelling at the woman, and at the precise moment that he slugs her in the forearm, knocking her slightly off balance, he looks at me.

I keep driving.

**Even if New Mexico's legislature** eventually passes a cockfighting ban, I realize that, like everything else that is outlawed from jaywalking to murder, there will always be those who will still partake in the illegal activity. And there will be those who will turn a blind eye.

As Nobel Prize winner author Isaac Bashevis Singer once observed, "The smugness with which man could do with other species as he pleased exemplifies the most extreme racist theories, the principle that might is right."

Frequent contributor Jeff Berg lives in Las Cruces.

Read Matt Retherford's, "My Cockfighting Career," also in this month's *Desert Exposure*.

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Desert Exposure