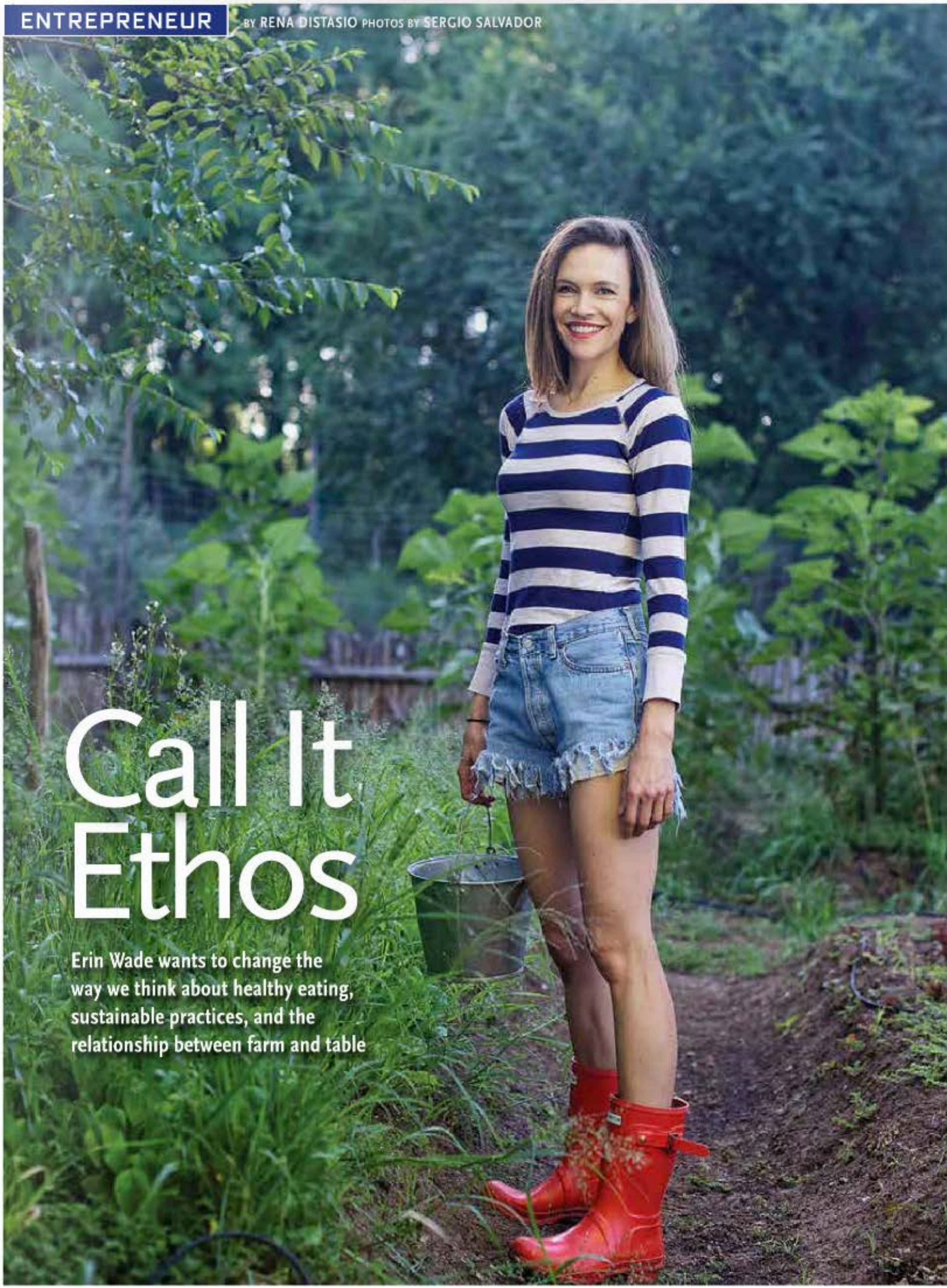


Call It Ethos

Erin Wade wants to change the way we think about healthy eating, sustainable practices, and the relationship between farm and table





ERIN WADE DOESN'T LOOK LIKE A FARMER.

Or like someone who parlayed a certain penchant for digging in the dirt into a concept restaurant, even if that restaurant happens to be the casually chic salad bistro Vinaigrette. With her long tumble of sun-streaked hair, tawny eyes, and petite frame clothed in T-shirt, skinny jeans, and boho sandals, the early-30-something Wade instead has a decidedly urban Cool Girl vibe, less soil-science geek and more, say, lifestyle or fashion blogger.

But Wade's entrepreneurial spirit runs deeper than the surface of a computer screen flashing pretty pictures. It goes all the way down into the land she has cultivated for the past eight years, and from which she drew knowledge for a healthier, more positive way to nurture people. In many ways, Vinaigrette is Wade's remedy for a world that—despite all the ballyhoo about sustainability and eco-responsibility—still has issues with food. She's spreading that

remedy. By late this fall, Wade will expand her ambitions beyond the boundaries of the Land of Enchantment.

Not that it didn't take time to discover this calling. After receiving her undergraduate degree in English from Harvard, the Bellingham, Washington, native spent a year in Milan studying fashion design, with the promise of a job at Harper's Bazaar waiting back in the States. But in the second of what she calls a "gestalt-shifting" moment of clarity (the first had been to ditch pre-med studies at Harvard in favor of a liberal-arts education) Wade realized that fashion was not her destiny. So she did what many bright and ambitious young people have done when struggling with the pressure to figure it all out by the time they hit 30. She went back to the land.

"I had been living in cities, and feeling like a fish out of water, for five years," she says. "My childhood had been about running around in the woods, being outside. I

missed space and quiet and the beauty of a more natural landscape."

What she calls her initial "vague, nagging craving" soon turned into an action plan. A vacant ten-acre parcel of family-owned land in Nambé, complete with an old adobe home, outbuildings, and three acres of water rights, was hers for the asking. "I realized that what I really wanted was to get my hands in the dirt," she says. "My mom made me read Wendell Berry when I was about ten, I think. There's a legacy of environmental stewardship in my family that started with my mom's dad. So in a sense, a commitment to taking care of the land is in my blood."

Its airy, light-filled atmosphere makes Albuquerque Vinaigrette a regular stop for visitors to nearby Old Town as well as locals working and living in downtown and its surrounding neighborhoods. Preceding page: Wade wearing her trademark red boots, working a section of the farm that includes tomato and lettuce beds interspersed with volunteer sunflowers. "Diversity is our main method of pest control," she says.

Wade's goal was to return her family's property to its agricultural roots and farm it organically in high-yield crops like salad greens, arugula, kale, mint, parsley, cilantro, and scallions. To learn the art and science of farming, she drew on her background in science, math, and the environment. (Her original pre-med major had been environmental science and public policy.) She also read books on soil science and agro-ecology, including organic farmer Eliot Coleman's classic how-tos. Then she just got out there and started doing it.

"I rehabilitated the soil first," she explains. "We have really delicate, fragile soils in New Mexico in general, and people are always talking about what a bummer it can be to grow food here. And it can be. But you can also take a piece of degraded land and make it better, leave it more diverse. The feeling of having improved that property from a biological and ecological standpoint is something I'm really proud of."

Originally, Wade had also planned to convert several of the outbuildings into agritourism vacation rentals. Then another concept emerged. "I was hugely, life changingly inspired by my time in Italy, but in ways that had nothing to do with fashion," she says. "Italians just don't have the baggage about food that we Americans do. They don't feel guilt about the pleasure of eating, and they don't separate it from health."

Raised in a foodie household, Wade instinctively knew this—but Harvard had shocked her system. "The food was so unbelievably shitty," she says, laughing. "I think I ate cereal with frozen yogurt the entire time." Another thing she noticed: her contemporaries either starved themselves or overindulged, a theme reflected in American culture at large. "We equate health with deprivation," she continues. "No wonder our appetites are so big—people always talk about the supply side, but what about the demand?"

Wade wanted to help change this yo-yo dynamic. She already had the means growing on her farm, but it wasn't until she drove by a vacant building in Pojoaque that she thought about opening a restaurant. "I thought to myself, 'I could have a little salad shack there.' There's infinite creativity with salads. They're the perfect vessel for this idea that eating healthy should be easy and not a deprivation."

Ultimately, she decided that Santa Fe would be better suited to her concept, and in 2008 she opened the first Vinaigrette, in a historic adobe on Don Cubero Alley, just off Cerrillos Road in Santa Fe.

Located next to Santa Fe Vinaigrette, Modern General was conceived by Wade as a store/café hybrid, where you can pick up a juice or breakfast sandwich and peruse the selection of books, garden tools, and household items. Offering free WiFi and ample seating, Modern General has also become a popular hangout, where people can gather at either the community table or at the counter, with its Piet Hein Eek up-cycled scrap wood bar stools and vintage 1930s factory lights.



KATHLEEN LANGLOIS

ENTREPRENEUR



Clockwise, from left: The farm's flock of chickens includes Araucanas, a variety known for blue and green eggs; One of Vinaigrette's popular salads, the All Kale Caesar, has Marcona almonds, parmesan, anchovies, and lemon-anchovy vinaigrette; Vinaigrette mills its own flour, sourced from wheat produced at small heritage farms in Arizona. Opposite: Wade designed Vinaigrette's outdoor patios as oases from the summer heat. The patio at the Austin location will be centered by a 500-year-old oak.



Although she was untrained as a chef, or in the restaurant industry as a whole, Wade had faith in the menu she developed from a mix of family recipes and her own instinctive palate. "We don't serve what you'd normally think of as a salad," she says. "I'm thinking about the flavor balance and the texture and the perfect amount of acid and salt and the little bit of creaminess and the crunch. All those different aspects that any chef is thinking about when making a sauce or dish. We put a lot of time into the architecture of a perfect bite."

Part of that bite can also include meat. "I think there's a sustainable, respectful way to eat and source meat," comments Wade, "but the proper portion size has been blown all out of proportion. We make salad the center of the plate, not the meat." Carni-

vores can add their choice of lemon-herb chicken breast, grilled flank steak, grilled pork tenderloin, or duck confit to any of two-dozen salad offerings, many with clever names like The Beet Goes On, The Nutty Pear-Fessor, or All Kale Caesar.

Like the farm, Vinaigrette also operates as a sustainable system: all organic waste produced by the restaurant is composted and fed back into the soil, which grows the produce that feeds customers. But while the farm-to-table ethos is central to her vision for Vinaigrette, Wade also urges a more nuanced understanding of the meaning of terms like sustainability and organic—often misinterpreted. "People want every last shred of everything to come from [the farm], but I have a responsibility to my land as well. I can only push it so far." As such,

roughly 70 percent of Vinaigrette's produce comes from the farm. The rest she sources from farm-owned brokerages like Albuquerque's Agri-Cultura Network. Neither is she certified organic, which is nothing more than a stamp of approval from the USDA. She does, however, grow organically, using compost instead of chemical fertilizers, employing companion plantings instead of pesticides, and undertaking extensive soil and water conservation methods.

Her mission clearly resonates with diners, and not just in Santa Fe. Since it opened in 2012 on Central Avenue in the Country Club neighborhood, Albuquerque Vinaigrette does a thriving business. This past February Wade debuted her take on a modern-day general store next door to her restaurant in Santa Fe. Part hardware store,

part grocery, part breakfast cafe, Modern General is an airy space filled with carefully curated items ranging from gardening books and supplies to kitchen items and locally produced food stuffs.

Late this fall Wade will also open a third Vinaigrette—this one in Austin, Texas—for which she is purchasing a ten-acre farm. "I'm not interested in expanding beyond our quirkiness," she comments, "but my intention was always that Vinaigrette would be a concept, with multiple locations. I believe in what we're doing . . . that this way of eating is relevant and powerful.

Why Austin?

"I want to go where we're needed," she explains. "I had looked at California and obviously the concept is a great fit, but it's very much done there. Plus, I had a lot of

customers come in and tell me, 'This would be great in Austin.' You start to listen, you know? With Austin, you have this teeming economy and locus of activity, but you also have this astonishing paucity of healthy places to eat."

For now, the Austin location will follow the Santa Fe and Albuquerque blueprint: same menu, with different interior design. It will also be an important spoke in the wheel of Wade's overall mission. "All businesses are modeled after the military, but I'm really interested in how we can be competitive and collaborative in the way that nature is—like an ecosystem. I think it involves the multiple concepts working together and based around a farm. That's the next wave for me. That's what I'm most excited about right now." ❁



BOTTOM RIGHT: NARRATIVE MEDIA



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