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For El Chorro Lodge's new executive chef Charles Kassels, coming on board was a no-brainer as he believes the history, ambience and food at El Chorro could never be duplicated.

El Chorro ownership team talks new vision

Chef shares food concepts,
favorite old-time memories

By Zach Colick
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If you are not moving forward, you are moving backward.

While a number of new features and dishes are planned at the new El Chorro Lodge, longtime customers can also expect some of their favorite traditions to remain intact as part of the customary "home" environment. Such a plan was crucial in the eyes of principal Jacquie Dorrance, who along with operating partners Kristy and Tim Moore, are reinvigorating the restaurant's ambience.

"Visiting El Chorro is like going home again," said Ms. Dorrance, noting former staff members from the former Pink Pony

and Quilted Bear plan to be contacted and retained at the new El Chorro. "You can go to the bar as a stranger and feel like you know 60 percent of the place. There's an intimacy to El Chorro, even if you're surrounded by 250 people. You felt like you belonged."

Ms. Dorrance purchased the property this summer from longtime owners and Paradise Valley residents Joe and Evie Miller.

El Chorro Lodge's new ownership team is relishing the opportunity to keep the longtime Paradise Valley hangout's tradition alive and thriving, while also incorporating new ideas so longtime customers and new ones alike visit come December when its doors reopen.

"We're not messing with success," Ms. Dorrance said.

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One thing for certain is sure to excite longtime customers: The restaurant's famous sticky buns will be available for order for Thanksgiving, Christmas and Hanukkah. Visit www.elchorrolodge.com for more information, as well as to vote for retaining favorite El Chorro dishes to remain on the restaurant's new menu. Voting has been extended to Wednesday, Oct. 14.

For El Chorro Lodge's new executive chef Charles Kassels, who was part of one of the last classes to graduate from Scottsdale High School and whose first memory of the iconic restaurant is from 1979 during a cotillion, coming on board was a no-brainer as he be-

lieves the history, ambience and food at El Chorro could never be duplicated.

A phone call placed to Mr. Kassels from the Moores once they acquired the restaurant took no more than a few minutes. Soon, Mr. Kassels was traveling from his New Mexico home — with his wife's blessing, of course — to help create a new vision for El Chorro with the Moores, who are longtime business partners.

"El Chorro doesn't change, it only gets better," Mr. Kassels said. "This is such a unique spot. It's truly the heart of Arizona and screams Arizona hospitality."

Mr. Kassels's style blends French techniques with fresh, seasonal and regional organic ingredients and influences from the Southwest and Asia. A chef for more than 15 years, Mr. Kassels was previously executive

chef for the Old House Restaurant in the El Dorado Hotel and Spa in Santa Fe, N.M.; executive banquet chef for the Westin Kierland Resort; banquet chef at the Boulders Resort; and executive chef at Continental Catering and Barmouche.

Mr. Kassels will continue the legacy and traditions familiar to the more than 70-year-old restaurant. Carried out through his culinary vision, the menu is centered on fresh, organic and locally-grown ingredients and also includes many of the traditional El Chorro menu item favorites.

His vision: Keeping a lot of the same traditions, especially heavy use of the mesquite grill, and, of course, the sticky buns.

Plans call for a 3,000-square-foot expansion of the outdoor patio, as well as knocking down walls to create a more open-air

environment. Six outdoor fireplaces and two firepits will be added and the property also will include an event garden for weddings or other gatherings. The dance floor will be expanded, while also including room for a baby grand piano.

A new indoor-outdoor bar will be added, although the new ownership team will be keeping the old bar that was part of the old Judson School. Some covered parking will be provided in the parking lot via solar panels that will help decrease the amount of electricity used at El Chorro. The restaurant will be able to accommodate 200 people.

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