My Favorite Recipe with

Colleen Langan-McRoberts

Bernalillo County Open Space Coordinator

She may oversee the use of nearly 1,000 acres in 13 different open space parks, but Bernalillo County Open Space Coordinator Colleen Langan-McRoberts makes time to whip up a batch of her grandmother's cheesecake.

Langan-McRoberts left the Land of Enchantment to live with her grandmother in New Jersey for a few years. When she returned in 2004, she brought the recipe back, too, as a way to remember her grandma (and get the occasional sugar fix).

"My grandma's just the most lovely person—she's 90 years old this year, but is as healthy as can be," Langan-McRoberts says. "This recipe, however, is not that healthy. She loves her sweets... I don't know how she pulled it off."

She says the recipe takes a bit too much time for her to partake in regularly, but she always makes sure to make it at least once a year.

"I make it for my father, to make him very happy and for both of us to think of her," Langan-McRoberts says. "There are no shortcuts here—you have to make your own crust, the pie is big, and you have to refrigerate it overnight, but it's absolutely delicious."

Rather than in the kitchen, She spends most of her time coordinating and overseeing year-round public activities in Bernalillo County Open Space's 13 parks, which range from bear and birding education workshops to a backyard farming series and family education classes designed to get kids and families away from TV and computer screens.

"Things have changed in our society. The fact is a lot of families are scared to let their kids play outside unsupervised," she says. "With the open spaces, we really wanted to provide safe, accessible ways for families—as a unit—to get out and reengage with nature."

The job was perfect for Langan-McRoberts, who already had a background in environmental education that was honed by a Peace Corps stint in the Philippines. She says she's always had an affinity for serving rural communities, and assisted upland rural tribes in one of the Philippine provinces the Bataan Death march came through in World War II.

More than 1,800 troops from New Mexico defended the Phillipines during the time of the Bataan Death March, but as many as 829 died in ensuing battles with the Japanese, or during the march itself.

"The Americans came to help them, and a lot of the elders remembered those times," she says. "They embraced me with open arms, which was really neat."

Langan-McRoberts worked briefly in Washington, D.C., as well, but wanted to put down permanent roots in a place where she could take her community education to the next level. And New Mexico was the only place on her mind.

"I guess I always knew that I was not going to be staying in those places in the long-run, and so my deep commitment level was different, compared to actually being in my community, working here and doing things to make our community better... I really feel I get to do that through my position."

Langan-McRoberts came onboard with the Open Space division in 2008, which was created 10 years ago out of community concern that the county's most significant natural areas would be developed.

"And so community members petitioned their commissioners to see if they could protect them and purchase them outright," Langan-McRoberts says. "They brought it to the voters to see if they'd be willing to vote for a mill levy tax. They voted yes, and so we were able to purchase the bulk of what we manage today."

Although the division administers property in the South Valley and the North Valley, the vast majority of open space properties are in the East Mountains, she says.

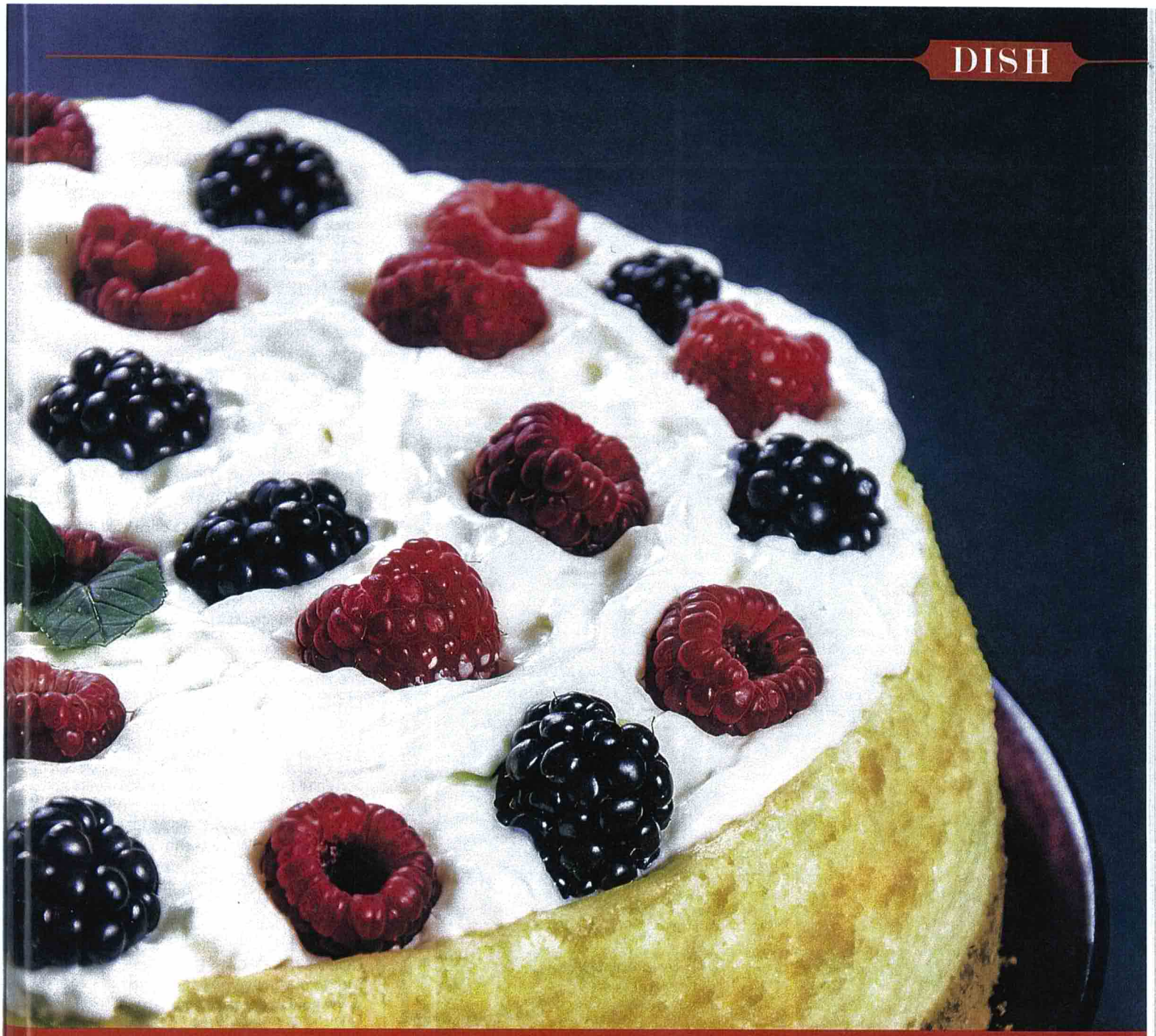
"They are all beautiful, but a couple of them have perennial springs, fruit tree orchards, and just spectacular sights that are havens for wildlife," she says. "There is always something significant about the properties we preserve—they have some cultural, environmental, or historical features that are worth saving."

One of the ways the division gets locals involved is through its Master Naturalist Program, circa 2010, that gives residents the chance to be certified for free as a Master Naturalist after 55 hours of training.

Upon graduation, program members are asked to carry out a 40-hour service project on Open Space properties, as more capable environmental advocates.

"They learn all about the local ecology; hydrology, geology, plant identification, how to track animals... You name it, when it comes to environmental stuff," she says. "They really do come away with a very baseline understanding, but will continue to be environmental stewards and lifelong learners of the natural world."

For more information on Bernalillo County Open Space programs, visit bernco.gov/openspace. —TOM SANDFORD



Grandma Langan's Cheesecake Recipe

Crust Ingredients:

3/4 box finely crushed Zwieback baby cookies
4 Tbsp. melted butter
4 Tbsp. sugar
1/2 tsp. cinnamon

Crust Directions:

Blend ingredients together and press into a buttered pan. Bake at 325 degrees for 10–15 minutes.

Filling Ingredients:

18 oz. cream cheese
1 1/2 cup sugar
3 Tbsp. flour
1 pinch salt
6 eggs (yolks creamed together and whites set aside)
1 1/2 cup sour cream
1 tsp vanilla

Filling Directions:

Blend all the ingredients together, except for the six egg whites. Beat the egg whites until stiff, then add 3 tablespoons of sugar. Slowly fold into the mix. Bake for one hour at 300–325 degrees. Cool on the countertop and let sit overnight in refrigerator. Serve with favorite topping.