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A Taste of Arizona

From down-home taquerias to chic resort dining rooms, fry bread and cowboy steaks to foie gras and sushi, Arizona is bound to please every palate, no matter how picky. As its many festivals and markets also attest, the state has both embraced and transcended its culinary roots.

Arizona's Major Food Groups – and Some Places to Enjoy Them

Native American: The most popular native food, **fry bread** – flat disks of deep-fried dough – comes topped with everything from honey to beans, meat, salad, and cheese (the so-called Navajo taco). Fry bread can be found at Native American fairs and festivals, as well as, year round, at the **San Xavier Plaza** in Tucson; the **Cameron Trading Post** near the Grand Canyon's South Rim; **Four Corners Monument** Navajo Tribal Park; and **Phoenix's Fry Bread House**.

Fry bread isn't associated with any one native tradition, but rather derives from the white flour and lard rationed by the U.S. military to the tribes it displaced in the 19th century. One of the only eateries to highlight indigenous cooking, the **Hopi Cultural Center** restaurant features such dishes as flaky **piki bread**, made from blue cornmeal, and **nöqkwivi**, lamb and hominy stew. **Kai**, the fine dining room at the Sheraton Wild Horse Pass Resort and Spa, an enterprise of the Gila River Community, brings native cuisine into the 21st century. Here traditional dishes are given a creative spin – tenderloin of buffalo with saguaro blossom syrup, say, or fry bread with kahlua ice cream – and community-grown or -raised ingredients are used whenever possible. Among the back-to-basics organizations to which Kai turns for other ingredients are the Tucson based **Native Seeds/SEARCH**, dedicated to conserving native crops and farming methods of the southwest U.S. and northern Mexico; and southern Arizona's **TOCA**, Tohono O'odham Community Action, whose goals include reintroducing the traditional desert-based foods.

Mexican: Sonora, the Mexican state that borders Arizona, has major culinary clout with its U.S. neighbor. Along with abundant seafood and beef dishes, Sonoran menu characteristics include egg dishes; and chiles that aren't incendiary. Perhaps the oldest of the many are the larger-

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than-usual corn tortillas and **nopales** (sliced prickly pear cactus pads) in some salads which can be found in Sonoran-style restaurants in Arizona's major metropolises, such as Tucson's **El Charro** which features the south-of-the border specialty, *carne seca*, air-dried beef. For the real Sonoran deal, travel 45 minutes from Tucson to Nogales, Mexico, and dine at the colorful, cavernous **La Roca**.

Many Arizona restaurants venture much farther into Mexico. **Cafe Poca Cosa** in Tucson, **Los Sombreros** in Scottsdale, and **Barrio Cafe** in Phoenix are among local favorites that feature dishes from a variety of Mexican states – Oaxaca, Yucatan, and Veracruz, to name a few. Some Az-Mex eateries turn to neighboring New Mexico for inspiration. **Los Dos Molinos** in Phoenix and **Romo's** in Holbrook, for example, make liberal use of fiery red and green Hatch chiles, and accompany their entrees with *sopapillas*, puffy fried bread.

Although the majority of the state's Mexican restaurants are casual and inexpensive, south-of-the-border fare and fine dining are by no means mutually exclusive. A prime case: **La Hacienda** at the Fairmont Scottsdale Princess, the only Mexican restaurant in North America to have earned both a Mobil Four Star and AAA Four Diamond rating for ambience and creative regional cuisine has in 2010, undergone recent refreshments which are sure to be exciting.

Old West: Actual cowboy food – think dried beans and jerky – isn't terribly appealing, but Arizona's many steakhouses are a tasty tribute to the once-thriving ranching industry. The state's big-meat palaces range from fun, Old West-themed dining rooms like **Pinnacle Peak Patio** (Tucson and Scottsdale), where ties are clipped off unsuspecting city slickers, to serious wheel-and-deal local spots such as **Durant's** (Phoenix) and **McMahon's** (Tucson). For the more adventurous, the **Cowboy Club** in Sedona offers a taste of the Sonoran Desert with its famous cactus fries (made from *napolitas*- cactus strips) and rattlesnake brochette.

New Southwestern: Q: What do you get when you mix Native American, Mexican, and Old West cooking traditions with creative chefs trained in the classical mode? A: New Southwestern cuisine. Early creators and innovators of this style, which varies greatly with each practitioner, include Janos Wilder of **Janos** and **J Bar** in Tucson and **Kai** in Greater Phoenix (as consulting chef); Vincent Guerithault of **Vincent's on Camelback** in Phoenix; and Robert McGrath of

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Roaring Fork in Scottsdale. But not all New Southwestern kitchens reside in the major cities: John Sharpe at the **Turquoise Room** in Winslow does exciting takes on regional specialties, often getting inspiration from the nearby Hopi Mesas.

Globe- and Venue- Trotting: Arizona cooking isn't limited to the local. In the major cities' posh resorts, happening restaurants and celebrity chefs dazzle both residents and guests with cuisines ranging from French and Spanish to New American and Italian. Diamonds, stars, best-of's, and beards (James, that is) are showered on such chic dining rooms as (in Greater Phoenix) **T. Cook's** at the Royal Palms Resort & Spa, **Southwest Bistro** at the Hyatt Regency Scottsdale Resort & Spa at Gainey Ranch, **Elements** at Sanctuary on Camelback Mountain, **Deseo** at Westin Kierland Resort & Spa; and (in Tucson) **Primo** at the JW Marriott Starr Pass Resort & Spa, and **Gold** at Westward Look.

Other Arizona Culinary Assets

Farmers markets: No need to go far afield to pick Arizona's prime produce. Farmer's markets have cropped up at many of the state's finest shopping spots, including **Phoenix's Biltmore Fashion Park**, **Scottsdale's Borgata**, and **Tucson's St. Phillips Plaza**.

Comestibles: Arizona celebrates its Mexican heritage with **tequila** and **mezcal**, it's oft-wormy cousin. At least half a dozen restaurants claim to offer the most types of tequila, including **Miguel's** in Tucson and the **Old Town Tortilla Factory** in Scottsdale. Which of them wins is a subject for further research, as is determining who in the state serves the best **margaritas**. The state's Old West heritage makes **beer** another Arizona natural. Among the many breweries, **Black Mountain Brewing**, north of Phoenix, stands out for its Cave Creek Chili Beer (with a whole chile in it), while the **Mogollon Brewing Company** in Flagstaff had the distinction of debuting prickly pear vodka in 2005.

Less expected are the state's many **wineries**, most concentrated in southeast Arizona. Standouts for quality include **Callaghan Vineyards** in Elgin and **Echo Canyon** near Sedona,

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but you have to visit the **Village of Elgin Winery** to go home with a bottle of Tombstone Red. For details, see www.arizonawine.org.

Celebrations: Of Arizona's many upscale culinary events, three stand out for their national scope: March's **Devoured Festival** in Phoenix, where local restaurants, chefs, and wineries are showcased; April's **Scottsdale Culinary Festival**, which includes a six-course dinner prepared by James Beard-award winners; and October's **Tucson Culinary Festival**, drawing star chefs and cookbook authors from around the country. In January 2006, **Slow Food Tucson Film Festival** debuted, promising to be a tasty, and satisfyingly cinematic, annual event. Salsa, the unofficial Arizona state condiment, is celebrated every April at the **Southwest Salsa Challenge** in Tempe, where more than 60 professional and amateur chefs prepare fresh salsa on site and attendees get to wash it down with samples from the Sauza Margarita Mix-Off.

More Choice Morsels

- Yuma, "Winter Lettuce Capital of the World," celebrates its annual March **Lettuce Days** with such events as cabbage bowling and the world's largest salad bar.
- In Amado, near Tubac, Micki Voisard, head and only member of **Dog Chefs of America**, offers canine cooking classes (for people) in her pet art gallery-cum-1950s-style diner.
- **El Charro** Cafe in Tucson lays claim to having created the chimichanga, and **Wisdom's Cafe**, near the Tumacacori mission, puts its oven mitts on the fruit chimichanga. Both pedigrees are hotly contested but no one argues that the Topopo salad – a crispy corn tortilla spread with refried beans and topped with lettuce, tomato, chicken, cheese, and often, sour cream – didn't come from Tucson, as it doesn't exist anywhere else.

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