

COMFORT FOOD

A Stew That Learns From Shepherd's Pie

Serve this hearty, stout-spiked beef stew over mashed potatoes.

See B2



APPETIZERS

Say Goodbye to Soggy Spring Rolls

Crisp, golden outsides and a colorful vegetarian filling make these the ultimate appetizer.

See B2

# FOOD

THE EPOCH TIMES

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The menu at Zio Peppe celebrates what chef Devon Sanner calls 'Tucson terroir.'

## Desert Treasures

In Tucson, Arizona, America's first City of Gastronomy, local food traditions celebrate the Sonoran Desert's unique bounty

ERIC LUCAS

Tucson, Ariz.—Carlos Figueroa is focusing intently on what he says was once just an avocation—freshly made, small-batch tortillas using heirloom corn varieties that are centuries, perhaps even thousands of years old.

"I just wanted good corn tortillas, man," said Figueroa, owner of Maiz Tucson, who began making tortillas by hand seven years ago. His day job was at a health research lab in this southern Arizona city, which is the home of the University of Arizona. Tucson is also America's first City of Gastronomy, a UNESCO distinction that signifies the

**In Tucson, you may order a latte flavored with mesquite flour, chiltepin chiles, or prickly pear juice.**

area's devotion to its food heritage.

"These heritage foods are representative of many living traditions that thrive today and are a source of identity and cultural vitality for the people who live here," the City of Gastronomy citation reads.

"We call it the Tucson terroir," said Devon Sanner, a local chef, advocate for the 2016 UNESCO designation, and cofounder of Zio Peppe, a superb new restaurant that offers a distinctive Italian-meets-Sonoran cuisine. Most memorably, mesquite flour lends a nutty depth to the Figgy Stardust Pizza, with its topping being honeyed cheese embellished with dried figs and pomegranate concentrate.

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A mural outside Zio Peppe celebrates Tucson's UNESCO designation.

VLAD SOKOLOVSKY/SHUTTERSTOCK

FLASH IN THE PAN

### The Hunter's Reward

A herd of elk in winter.



A wintertime elk hunt comes with unique challenges—and prizes

ARI LEVAUX

Wild game is the tastiest, cleanest, and most ecologically justifiable meat on the planet. But the ultimate reward of hunting is neither the kill nor the thrill of the chase, but how you come out the other side—regardless of whether or not you bring meat. It requires competency on many levels, including navigation, shooting, wildlife biology, your own physical limits, and reading a landscape. I look at mountains differently now, palpating each valley and fold with my eyes hungrily.

My wintertime elk hunting trips in mid-

dle Montana are cathartic journeys. The bitter cold is invigorating and demanding. The relentless wind is cleansing and therapeutic; when it shoves you around and screams in your ear, it's hard to not take it personally. After a hunt, I feel like I can do anything, and everything else feels easy by comparison.

This year, getting to where I wanted to hunt took three attempts. On my first try, I hit a chunk of private property that I stupidly hadn't noticed on the map. The next time, I almost got stuck in the snowdrifts crossing the road. I came back a few days later with a new set of tire chains and made it a few miles further up the road, then clicked into my backcountry skis. After a steep climb, I finally got to the edge of the area where I was permitted to hunt.

*Continued on B5*



# Desert Treasures

In Tucson, Arizona, America's first City of Gastronomy, local food traditions celebrate the Sonoran Desert's unique bounty

Sunset in the Sonoran Desert.

COURTESY OF VISIT TUCSON



At Barrio Bread, baker Don Guerra crafts artisan loaves with locally grown heritage grains, including white Sonora wheat.

COURTESY OF VISIT TUCSON



Local distiller Whiskey del Bac uses mesquite fire to smoke the barley for its Dorado and Old Pueblo products—genuine smoky single-malts.

*Continued from B1*

For ingredients, Sanner calls on a regional refugee gleaner network, Iskashitaa, with members that gather and grind mesquite pods and, when they can, harvest figs and other fruit.

As with Iskashitaa, Carlos Figueroa's avocation-turned-business illustrates what cultural heritage vitality looks like in daily life. He carefully acquires heirloom grain; nixtamalizes (an alkaline softening treatment to remove the corn seed shell) it himself; grinds it using volcanic stones to achieve a fine, velvet consistency; and turns that fresh masa into tortillas the very next day.

## Local Flavor

Aside from heirloom corn tortillas, in Tucson, you may order a latte flavored with mesquite flour, chiltepin chile peppers, or prickly pear juice. You can top off a white-linen dinner of bison tenderloin with local pecan gelato. Hotel guests can browse on-site citrus groves with oranges, grapefruits, limes, lemons, tangerines, kumquats, and more. Local confectioners include prickly pear and chiltepin chiles in their chocolates and candies.

Chefs, growers, food artisans—all embrace what's known as "borderlands" food, combining the indigenous, Hispanic, and American heritage of the area. Having grown up in Tepic, Nayarit, in northern Mexico, Figueroa epitomizes the cultural blend.

After a lengthy sojourn in Mexico studying the art of tortillas in 2020 and 2021, he was back in Tucson, running a new batch of masa through a small machine that forms the tortillas one by one and spills

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The Mission Garden project recreates the orchards and farmsteads that have fed Tucsonans for millennia.  
COURTESY OF VISIT TUCSON

them out onto a comal automático. This slowly rotating three-level griddle roasts the tortillas and shuffles them down to a collector where they stack up.

Although Figueroa favors Arizona-grown grain when he can get it—a kind called Pima corn available in the fall—he sometimes uses heirloom corn from Mexico, a variety called chalqueño paloma from Tlaxcala. The Winter morning sun beaming through a side window cast an ivory glow on the tortillas. The yeasty, sweet smell of the charred tortillas belied their simple composition—ground corn and water, nada más.

## Deep Roots

Heirloom corn is one of almost 100 different foodstuffs that are traditional in what cultural anthropologists call the Tucson Basin, the area south of the Santa Catalina Mountains, drained by the Santa Cruz River. In flat ground along the Santa Cruz, indigenous peoples were using irrigation to raise corn, beans, and squash—the famous "three sisters" of Meso-American agriculture—more than 4,000 years ago, one of the world's oldest such areas. This history is celebrated today at the Mission Garden project, a recreation of the orchards and farmsteads that have fed Tucsonans for millennia.

While Carlos Figueroa said he just wanted good corn tortillas—the fine grind he applies to his heirloom masa yields silky tortillas—he acknowledged that it may have a deeper meaning than that.

"My girlfriend Laura says I can't not do this," he said, cradling a stack of fresh tortillas to be sacked up after they cool enough.

Figueroa sells them through community subscription farms, a small local tienda, and farmer's markets.

"I am expressing my unsaid self," he said.

So is Tucson, embracing a distinctive character that dates back four millennia and has been spiced and colored and broadened every century since. Although the City of Gastronomy designation isn't as conspicuous or embedded in the Tucson lifestyle as, say, Napa Valley appellation is for wine, it underlies southern Arizona like the backing on a pioneer quilt—essential to the entire fabric of Sonoran life.

*Eric Lucas is a retired associate editor at Alaska Beyond Magazine and lives on a small farm on a remote island north of Seattle, where he grows organic hay, beans, apples, and squash.*

## If You Go



### Barrio Charro

This lunch cafe uses Barrio Bread's wheat-and-corn Azteca loaf for its "Tucsonified" sandwiches, as well as prickly pear barbecue sauce. [BarrioCharro.com](http://BarrioCharro.com)

### PY Steakhouse

The fine dining room at Casino del Sol, a Pascua Yaqui tribe enterprise, offers a seasonal menu that includes Arizona polenta, Green Valley pecans, and local citrus and chiles. [CasinoDelSol.com/dining/py-steakhouse](http://CasinoDelSol.com/dining/py-steakhouse)

### Maiz Tucson

Look for Carlos Figueroa's heirloom corn tortillas at 5 Points Market and Time Market. [MaizTucson.com](http://MaizTucson.com)

### Zio Peppe

Perhaps the premier advocate of Tucson terroir, look for mesquite and local figs in the pizza, elote arancini with lime crema, red chile lasagna, and ancho chile braised short ribs and gnocchi. [ZioPeppeAZ.com](http://ZioPeppeAZ.com)

### Cheri's Desert Harvest

This local confectioner's candies, preserves, and syrups include prickly pear, red lime, red chile, pomegranate, and jalapeño. [CherisDesertHarvest.com](http://CherisDesertHarvest.com)

### La Chaiteria

This Latin bistro has prickly pear, chiltepin, and mesquite lattes, as well as a wide assortment of Southwestern brunch plates featuring many different chiles. [LaChaiteria.com](http://LaChaiteria.com)

ERIC LUCAS



Carlos Figueroa of Maiz Tucson handmakes his tortillas with heirloom corn.

COURTESY OF ZIO PEPPE



Locally harvested and ground mesquite flour lends a nutty depth to Figgy Stardust pizza at Zio Peppe. The pie is topped with honeyed cheese embellished with dried figs and pomegranate concentrate.



ALL PHOTOS BY SHUTTERSTOCK

## Desert Delicacies

Sonoran foods range from cactus to mesquite to corn and citrus. Here are the ones most easily found by visiting connoisseurs of regional delicacies.

### Prickly Pears

Anyone who's ever visited the Southwest has seen these iconic cacti, their ping-pong paddle arms branching like candelabras and sporting, in fall and winter, conical fruits that are a fierce fuchsia color, as vivid as a desert sunset. The juice of these fruits—called tunas in Spanish—is widely used in jellies, bar drinks, candies, marinades, gelato, sorbets, and more.



Prickly pear cactus.

Prickly pears can also be eaten fresh. They're highly flavored, full of seeds, and must be handled with care, as tiny hair-like spines cover the fruit. I've picked them from west Texas to southern California, but one must use gloves and then brush off the spines with a towel. This difficulty and their easily-bruised nature are the reasons the fresh fruit is rarely seen for sale.

The green arms are also used for food, spines removed and the paddles cut into strips or bits and called nopales, which serve a similar function in soups and stews that okra does in southern cuisine.

### Mesquite

Ground from the seed pods of the quintessential desert hardwood, mesquite flour lends a nut-like, mellow depth to foods. It's largely an additive. You can find it in everything from pizza dough and bread to lattes to cookies.



Mesquite wood chips.



Mesquite seed pods.

Mesquite wood is also highly sought for fine, dark, durable furniture—and it's the fuel of choice for barbecue and grilling from West Texas to Arizona.

One Tucson company, Whiskey del Bac, uses mesquite fire to smoke the barley for its Dorado and Old Pueblo (Tucson's nickname) products—genuine smoky single-malts. The company's whiskey is ubiquitous as a flavoring in Tucson fine dining menus.

### Chiltepins and Other Chiles

Tiny, round, peppercorn-like, and the color of an autumn moon, chiltepin peppers are ferocious chiles native to southern Arizona. Foragers pick them in the wild, although they're also commercially grown. Aside from being quite hot (25 times hotter than a jalapeño), they have a distinctive smoky flavor that creates their surprising suitability to blend with coffee and chocolate.



Chiltepin peppers.

Other chiles, such as poblanos (which make the best *releños*), chiles de árbol (hot and nutty), and serranos (like jalapeños but twice as hot) are common on Tucson menus.

### Figs, Citrus, and More

Cactus fruits were the mainstay of indigenous life here until Spanish missionaries brought their many other arid-land fruits from the old world—chiefly citrus, which has been a major industry in Tucson for decades. Orchards and trees dot the Tucson landscape, most memorably at a number of resort hotels where guests are welcome to pick the fruit during the winter and early spring.



Tangerines.

### Corn and Other Grains

Aside from heirloom corn, southern Arizona is the home of white Sonora wheat, a variety brought there 300 years ago by famed Jesuit missionary Eusebio Kino. Drought-hardy and adapted to desert alkaline soils, it enabled the popularity of the large wheat tortillas used for burritos in northernmost Mexico and across the United States. Almost eradicated from commercial cultivation a few decades ago, the heritage variety is now making a comeback and is widely used in Southern Arizona bakeries. Blended with corn at Barrio Bread, it makes a robust sandwich loaf named "Azteca."



Corn.

## FLASH IN THE PAN

# The Hunter's Reward

A wintertime elk hunt comes with unique challenges—and prizes

*Continued from BI*

In the magical light of the setting sun, I spotted a massive elk herd in a large field about two miles away, but had no time left on the clock to pursue. I was elated, knowing they would likely be here when I made it back. On the way down, I stopped to watch a lynx lick its paws.

On the fourth day, I started before dawn and got even further up the road. I skied up the ridge, climbing 1,000 feet out of the canyon and into the blasting wind.

When I got to the spot, I couldn't see the herd in the field where they had been, but I headed that way anyway. I had my eye on a forested ridge about halfway there, perpendicular to my line of travel. When I got close to the ridge, I veered off course, toward an open saddle, because cresting the ridge with the wind at my back might bring the scent straight over. I crossed the saddle and slipped into the forest on the other side, my skis silent in the powder snow. The wind was noticeably less oppressive. Instead of screaming in my ear, it was screaming a hundred feet away, giving a sense of peace and shelter like the sound of rain on a roof. Trees were creaking in the wind, which sounds a lot like the sound of elk talking.

I slunk along until I saw a large cow, bedded down, facing the ridge with her nose into the wind, barely a hundred yards away. It was a layup of a shot. I backed up until it was out of sight, which meant I was out of sight, and then took off my skis.

I snuck around the forest in the deep powder snow, missing my skis but ready to lie down and shoot. My noise was completely muffled by the wind, which also carried away my scent. I saw more cows, and a massive body next to a tree, with billowing waves of bulging flesh all over the place. Its head was behind the tree, but its fur had a golden hue, which means he was a bull. In that area, at that time, I was only allowed to shoot antler-less elk, a category that includes juveniles—calves—and females of any age.

**My wintertime elk hunting trips in middle Montana are cathartic journeys. After a hunt, I feel like I can do anything, and everything else feels easy by comparison.**

Garlic-fried wild game—or the closest to it you can find—completes this zingy herb salad.



ARI LEVAUX

I was three miles from the truck, the wind was picking up, and it was starting to snow. I knew I might get snowed in, or not be able to come back the next day, so I wanted an elk that was small enough to haul out that evening. The full-grown cows, in addition to being huge, were likely pregnant.

Finally, I spotted a small head atop a dark, skinny neck, 80 yards away. I lay on my belly and made a gun rest out of snow, and found its head in my scope. I took a breath, and shot. The rest of the herd stood up around me and silently vanished.

Then the work began. I cut a piece of skin from its rib cage and knelt on the warm fur to keep my knees dry. An hour later I had removed the shoulders, the hindquarters, the long rib eyes (aka "backstraps"), two tenderloins, and as much neck meat as I could carve off. I divided the load in half, clicked back into my skis, and shouldered the heavier half, along with my .270. I could only make it about 200 yards.

I put down my load and rested my shoulders while I went back for the other half, which I carried further, grabbing my rifle as I passed the first load. I continued leapfrogging my loads until I got to the road. Then I went down for the sled and slid everything down to the truck, 10 hours since I shot the elk, 13 miles since leaving the truck.

After that kind of bloody struggle, I don't want to eat meat right away. I want to wash off the smell of blood, change my clothes, and decompress. Back at the cabin, I made a salad of parsley, onion, and lemon juice, and a pack of chicken flavored ramen with an egg cracked into it, and fell asleep. The next night, I sliced one of the tenderloins, fried it in garlic, and added it to the same salad. Each elk amino coursing through my veins was a trophy more delicious than any antler. But more than meat or bone, the best part of hunting is the participation award.

*Ari LeVaux writes about food in Missoula, Mont.*

## ELK AMINO SALAD

Move over side salad, and pass that fried salad. If you don't have wild game for the pan, seek out the most ecologically sound, most humane, and yes, most expensive piece of red meat you can find. Beef is the closest, but not very close at all.

**SERVES 1 HUNGRY, TIRED, AND HAPPY HUNTER, OR 2 MERE MORTALS**

**1/2 to 1 pound meat, cut into 1/2-inch chunks**  
**4 tablespoons lemon juice, divided**

**1/2 teaspoon salt**  
**1/2 teaspoon pepper**  
**4 tablespoons olive oil, divided**  
**2 large cloves garlic, pressed or minced, divided**  
**1 cup minced onion, divided**  
**1 bunch parsley**

Put the meat in a bowl with 3 tablespoons of the lemon juice, the salt, and the pepper and stir together. Add 3 tablespoons of the olive

oil, half the garlic, and half the onions. Cut the parsley in half so that one half is mostly leaves and the other half mostly stems with a few leaves. Mince the stem half and toss it in with the meat.

Marinate in the fridge for as long as you can. At serving time, fry on medium heat in a heavy pan until the meat is browned on all sides.

Transfer the contents of the pan to a bowl and add the remaining onions, garlic, parsley, lemon juice, and olive oil. Season to taste.

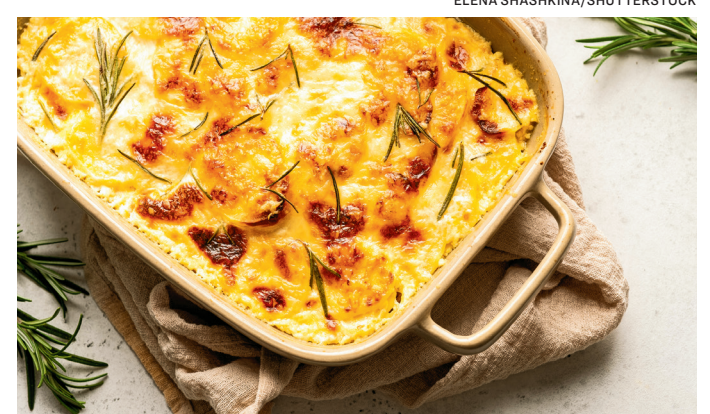
## A Winning Gratin for the Wintertime Table

**KARY OSMOND**

You'll love the flavors in this satisfying side dish. The onion adds to the slight sweetness of the celery root, while the Gruyere adds to its nuttiness. This is a decadent dish that smells delicious and comforting as it bakes.

Just be sure to let it rest after it comes out of the oven. Cooling slightly will allow the cream to finish thickening.

*Kary Osmond is a Canadian recipe developer and former television host of the popular daytime cooking show "Best Reci-*



ELENA SHASHKINA/SHUTTERSTOCK

*pes Ever." Her easy recipes include helpful tips to guide you along the way, and her love of plant-based cooking offers healthy alternatives to some of your favorite dishes. Learn more at KaryOsmond.com. Copyright 2022 Kary Osmond. Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.*

This dish pairs well with a simple green garden salad.

## CELERY ROOT AND ONION GRATIN

**SERVES 4 TO 6**

**1 tablespoon butter**  
**2 medium celery roots, peeled, halved, and thinly sliced (2 pounds)**  
**2 cups thinly sliced onion (about 2 medium onions)**  
**1 tablespoon finely chopped garlic (about 2 cloves)**  
**1 teaspoon salt**  
**1/4 teaspoon pepper**  
**1 cup whipping cream (35 percent fat)**

**1 cup grated Gruyere cheese**

Preheat oven to 400 degrees F. Butter an 11-by-7-inch glass baking dish.

Mix together celery root, onion, garlic, salt, pepper, and whipping cream in a large bowl. Pour celery root mixture into baking dish and spread to an even thickness and gently press to compact. Sprinkle with cheese. Bake until top is golden brown, about 60 minutes. Allow to rest for 10 minutes before serving.

**TASTY TIPS**

It's easier to mix the celery root and onion

mixture with your hands. This will make sure the cream and garlic spread evenly throughout the onions and celery root.

A pinch of thyme or rosemary would be a nice addition to this recipe.

A mandolin or a slicing wheel on a food processor is a sure way to slice the onion and celery root quickly.

Remember, you must use whipping cream (35 percent fat). If you use a lower fat cream, it will curdle.