COVER STORY

A Guide to the Indigenous Food Scene in Greater Phoenix

We hope these three glimpses, read together, convey a rough outline of the Indigenous food scene in greater Phoenix.

By Chris Malloy | October 15, 2020

Profiling three major players in the native food scene around metro Phoenix. **Jacob Tyler Dunn**

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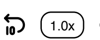

In and around Phoenix, young capital of a state that is a quarter Native American land, which of course was once 100 percent Native land, you can find great Indigenous foods for public eating.

The tribes of the Sonoran Desert have a long history of farming, hunting, and trading for ingredients – of foodways that reflect the vitality and complexity of life in this singular corner of the world. These traditions aren't locked in the past. They live on today, in a region that's home to Native American stands, trucks, trailers, roasteries, and restaurants.

Still, Phoenix (the city) doesn't have as many places to eat Native foods as one might expect, and, in the last decade, several have come and gone. Really, it's just a small scattering of current options, most of them mobile. The dearth of Native foods prepared by Natives in Phoenix is a product of colonization, forced assimilation of Indigenous people through mandatory "education" (Phoenix Indian School didn't close until 1990), and deep-rooted systemic inequalities that plague our state (and country) to this day.

Nationally, Indigenous food activists have been working hard to promote traditional foodways and food sovereignty. This push is visible in the growing body of writing on the subject and TV, including the recent documentary Gather, which features two Western Apache food leaders based in Arizona: Nephi Craig and Twila Cassadore. (We covered the latter in **a feature last year**.) Up and down the

state, on and off the radar, other Native leaders are doing the same.

Locally, Indigenous kitchens preparing food for the general public fall into two camps: those in the urban metro area, and those on reservations. Cooks in both places turn out beans, squash, and corn, often starting from ancient varieties grown on local farms. They hoist moon-pocked discs of frybread from crackling oil baths, griddle the centuries-old Sonoran flour tortilla known as ceme't until fragrant and browned, adorn tacos, simmer stews, pull espresso, steep tea, and stay true to tradition, or innovate.

We recently caught up with three Native authorities from different spheres of the Indigenous food scene in greater Phoenix. Each prepares food you can find and eat, if you please. One's an imaginative Diné chef. Another's an Akimel O'odham cook and educator. The third is a second-generation proprietor of a storied Tohono O'odham eatery.

We hope these three glimpses, read together, convey a rough outline of the Indigenous food scene in greater Phoenix – valuable for so many reasons.

Jaren Bates with his 500-gallon smoker.

Chris Malloy

Jaren Bates

Chef
Wild: Arizona Cuisine

Quietly, Diné chef Jaren Bates has been plating some of the most interesting food in the Valley. He dusts sashimi with foraged sumac, coats tataki in barrel cactus seeds, and transforms corn – roasted underground the old way, by his own hand – into ice cream.

Along with Brett Vibber – for whom he served as a sous chef at Cartwright's Modern Cuisine, and with whom he is now partners in the forthcoming restaurant **Wild: Arizona Cuisine** – Bates has been experimenting with transforming Indigenous ingredients via fermentation: saguaro fruit vinegar, acorn miso, some of the most progressive culinary projects in town. As a high-end chef, though, Bates's style is deceptively simple. He tries to present fresh and freshly foraged ingredients in the best possible light. This doesn't take much.

"You can make really great food with simple, humble ingredients and not have to do a single thing to them beyond butter, salt, pepper, and some type of acid, and maybe a little herb or something else to go with it," he says. "That's my cooking right there. Treating the ingredient with respect and letting it shine."

Lately, given that he's between restaurants, those ingredients have shifted. These days, Bates is focused on barbecue. Using the 500-gallon offset smoker he welded with his brother over the course of a summer on his family's farm in New Mexico, Bates, 33, has been smoking beef, pork, and chicken for pop-up dinners.

He has evolved a barbecue style unlike those found in America's barbecue belt. His looks more to his roots and the wilds of the Southwest. "Everybody wants brisket or pork ribs or beef ribs, all the same norms you see everywhere," he says. "And I think that introducing bison or elk or rabbit or quail, it gives someone something to talk about."

Those proteins lie in his future restaurant project currently taking shape. For now, his pop-up meals through Wild center more mainstream barbecue meats, with sides like Ute Mountain blue corn cornbread, pinole buns, and tepary bean salad.

Bates situates himself within the cadre of Indigenous chefs who are presenting traditional foods in new ways. "With Brian Yazzie and Sean Sherman, they want to get away from processed food, like white sugar and white flour," he says, citing two of the movement's most visible cooks. "They want to move more back into, like, wild rice as a big thing, or smoked or braised bison, or quail. It's going back to how Native Americans ate back then, but also giving it a twist that chefs get from their learnings throughout their careers."

Bates foresees the Native food scene in metro Phoenix becoming more innovative gradually, tracking the rising national movement. "I foresee it evolving," he says. "It's a lot smaller. It's a lot longer of a race to get there, because there's not a lot of well-known [Indigenous] chefs out there [in metro Phoenix]. There's some, but they're sticking with tradition. They're doing the food that they grew up with."

He's happy for that. He's also happy to go his own way. His latest project, vinegar made from the wild herb Navajo Tea, has shown promise in early tastings. It could become an ingredient he uses widely, one that lets him preserve more wild foods into out-of-season months, one that can speak to the past, present, and future.

If the trial goes well, he says, "that'll be another thing in my back pocket."

Alyssa Dixon, founder of Alyssa's Kosin.

Jacob Tyler Dunn

Alyssa Dixon

Cook and Educator
Alyssa's Kosin

In 2017, after about five years of "doing a little bit of everything" as an employee in the office of

Ramona Farms, a traditional O'odham farm on the Gila River Indian Community, Alyssa Dixon started her own Native foods business: **Alyssa's Kosin**.

Dixon cooks Akimel O'odham foods. She caters. She delivers meals to people's houses. Every two weeks prior to the pandemic, she parked in a roadside lot below the water tower of Sacaton, known for its mobile food vendors.

Many in the popular Gila River Indian Community lot prepare staples, like frybread, ceme't, beans, and stews. Dixon brings something different to the lunch hour. She prepares "healthy, nutritious foods" that "intertwine ancestral ingredients."

This might mean wraps on whole-wheat ceme't, tepary bean salad, or mesquite muffins.

She is fastidious about ingredients. "All of my tepary beans ... any of my wheat, any of my corn, they all come from Ramona Farms," she says. "I tell everyone that my first go-to is anything grown within the Community. Anything else I have, whether it's the cholla buds, the mesquite flour, that all comes from San Xavier Co-op [on the Tohono O'odham Nation]. And anything else, like mesquite syrup, we forage ourselves."

Dixon had found her stride before COVID hit. She catered events of up to 250 people, most in the Community. She had found a groove with delivery and setting up in the vendor lot. Though she has paused due to the pandemic, she believes the future is bright. Her food sources, passion, and goals start and end with the Community.

"I'm just trying to start a conversation around Indigenous foods, ancestral foods, of the Akimel O'odham," she says, "and learn different traditional ways of cooking, consuming, and learning how we can do that more day to day."

Growing up, Dixon lived both on the Community and in various parts of metro Phoenix. Her interest in ancestral foods was stoked by a variety of sources. One was her grandmother, Donna Dixon, who often cooked them for her when she attended high school in Chandler. Another was her other grandmother's sister, the founder of Fry Bread House, Cecelia Miller. At one of her childhood homes, Dixon lived down the street from the restaurant.

"Growing up, being related to Grandma Cecilia, we were constantly kind of visiting her at the Fry Bread House at the original location," Dixon says. "That was the only place I knew that you could get any kind of Native foods, which was the fry bread, the pinto beans, the chile stew, green chile, tortillas, whatever they had there. When we moved to the west side of Phoenix, I didn't know anywhere to get any type of Native foods. It was always just Fry Bread House on the other side of town."

In high school, her interest deepened. "Everything started to click," she says. Now, she "talks to elders, getting their food memories and the different types of food that are gardened, and the different types of foods that were traded among the four sister tribes of Arizona."

Once she starts up again, Dixon hopes to use her growing knowledge to integrate a wider spread of Akimel O'odham foods into Alyssa's Kosin. She may drizzle mesquite syrup over simple fruit or yogurt, or spoon saguaro fruit jam over vanilla ice cream. With these foods and others like wild spinach and wolfberries, she hopes to keep answering questions like "How do we make a difference?" and "How do we bring those things back to life?"

Fry Bread House's Sandra Miller working the fryer.

Jacob Tyler Dunn

Sandra Miller

Proprietor
Fry Bread House

The longtime anchor of the Native food dining scene in Phoenix is **Fry Bread House**. In 1992, Cecilia Miller opened the Tohono O'odham restaurant. On her first day, she had three items on the menu (four counting soda) and made $50. Over time, the popularity of the restaurant grew, even as its location moved. In 2012, Fry Bread House won a James Beard Award. Cecilia passed this spring. Sandra Miller, her daughter, 49, carries on her legacy.

Cecilia started Fry Bread House, Sandra recalls, so Indigenous people could have a place beyond the home to eat.

"She really felt there was a lot of discrimination in Phoenix toward minority people, and in particular she felt it as a Native woman," Sandra says. "She knew there was no place for her to go and sit down and eat comfortably."

With Fry Bread House, Cecilia hoped to provide that comfort. "She wanted Indian people to feel like they were going into a Native house and sitting with their aunties and their grandmothers, or their sisters and their kids, and just having something to eat like they would on the reservation," Sandra says.

Fry Bread House cooks Tohono O'odham foods. The menu includes the red chiles long cooked by Tohono and Akimel O'odham, plus other staples, such as ceme't and many iterations of the three sisters: corn, squash, and beans.

Frybread is the restaurant's heart. You can get it as a taco base, burger bun, side, or even laced with hot chocolate sauce.

"Ours is a bit lighter and fluffier than some other tribes," Sandra says. "We use a couple of things in the ingredients that not everybody else uses."

Some Natives avoid fry bread, seeing it as a food born through genocide and forced removal of Native Americans over generations of violent U.S. expansion. Sandra sees the modern staple's history in a similar light but ultimately believes fry bread can be enjoyed, even celebrated.

"We can see the colonialism ties and the strands of that in the food and in the menu that we have," Sandra says. "Our perspective is that it really shows how resilient and opportunistic and smart Native people are. You know, they've taken something that was so deplorable and so negative and we turned it into something that became a feast for our families."

Like Bates, like Dixon, Sandra notes that fry bread is more of a special-occasion food. More commonly, she says, she and many regulars consume ceme't. The floppy tortilla is cooked at Fry Bread House on the retired metal tire rim of a field tractor, reaching back into the agricultural roots of our region.

Today, as for nearly three decades, Fry Bread House employs Indigenous people from tribes throughout Arizona and beyond. Though the pandemic has proven a steep challenge, the eatery remains the steadiest, most visible, and most acclaimed source of Native foods in town.

Over time, Sandra has seen metro Phoenix's Native foods scene change. "It has grown," she says, citing the proliferation of Native grain and corn, and of foods more indicative of what people eat when they gather socially.

"We're still doing syrup and different pastries with the bahidaj [saguaro fruit] syrup when that comes around," she says. "And the cholla buds and the prickly pear pads, those are becoming more available ... because people are eating those again. They're bringing those back and they're keeping those recipes alive."

Sandra says these changes will soon be reflected at Fry Bread House. She plans to winnow the menu to a few favorites, then build out using a wider array of Indigenous ingredients, like tepary beans, Indigenous corn, more types of chiles, and foods like yeasted oven buns that "you'll always get in Tohono O'odham [Nation] when you go down for a funeral or a wedding."

She hopes to give "an option of having this healthier fare that we use traditionally, that kept us really healthy and fit, and fit spiritually." This dovetails with the reason her mother opened Fry Bread House in the first place. It carries Phoenix's best-loved Indigenous eatery back in time to carry it forward.

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