



From left: the gardens of Hacienda Del Sol; pepper, blue cheese, Maynards; hibiscus buds, Mission Garden; breakfast at Baja Café; cocktail time; San Xavier del Bac rises out of the desert

Praising Arizona

Desert-to-dish cuisine, authentic Mexican street food and a quietly flourishing wine scene make the south-western American city of Tucson a gastronomic hotspot

WORDS BY ESTELLA SHARDLOW. PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK PARREN TAYLOR

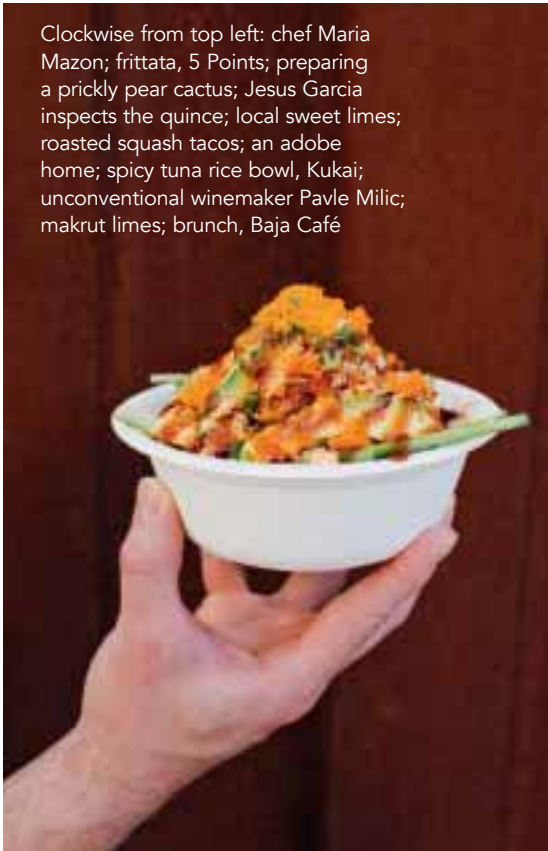




The well-preserved, 18th-century church of San Xavier del Bac

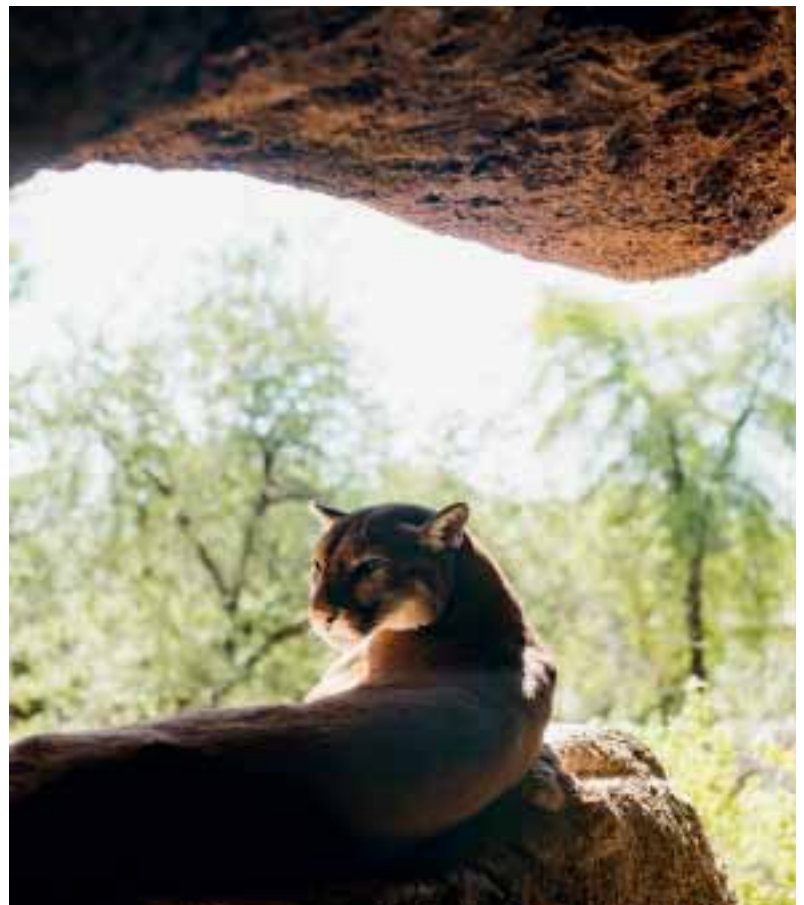


Clockwise from top left: chef Maria Mazon; frittata, 5 Points; preparing a prickly pear cactus; Jesus Garcia inspects the quince; local sweet limes; roasted squash tacos; an adobe home; spicy tuna rice bowl, Kukai; unconventional winemaker Pavle Milic; makrut limes; brunch, Baja Café



The chiltepins rattle in ethnobiologist Jesus Garcia's palm like tiny, red beads. 'This is the mother of all peppers,' he declares, squinting into the Arizonan sunshine, the thorny branches of palo alto trees casting sharp shadows over the red clay earth. He explains how virtually all the cultivated chillies we eat today can be traced back to this origin species. 'Their heat doesn't last long, but it's intense – 20 times hotter than a jalapeño,' he warns.

He's sharing his knowledge in Mission Garden, an oasis of heirloom crops and edible native plants on the outskirts of Arizona's second city, Tucson. 'We've had 4,000 years of continuous agriculture in this place,' says Jesus. 'Beneath our feet are irrigation canals dug by the Tohono O'odham, this land's first farmers.' Plots at Mission Garden act as living museums, a timeline of what was cultivated through the centuries, starting with the 'three sisters' (corn, squash and tepary beans) that fed Native American villagers, through to an orchard of Mediterranean fruit trees – pomegranates, oranges, figs – introduced by Spanish missionaries in the 1600s. As a butter-yellow swallowtail butterfly darts past, Garcia plucks a quince from a nearby branch. He slices through the fuzzy skin with his penknife and presents a wedge of the sweet, crunchy flesh. 'I call this an edible history lesson,' he grins. —————>>



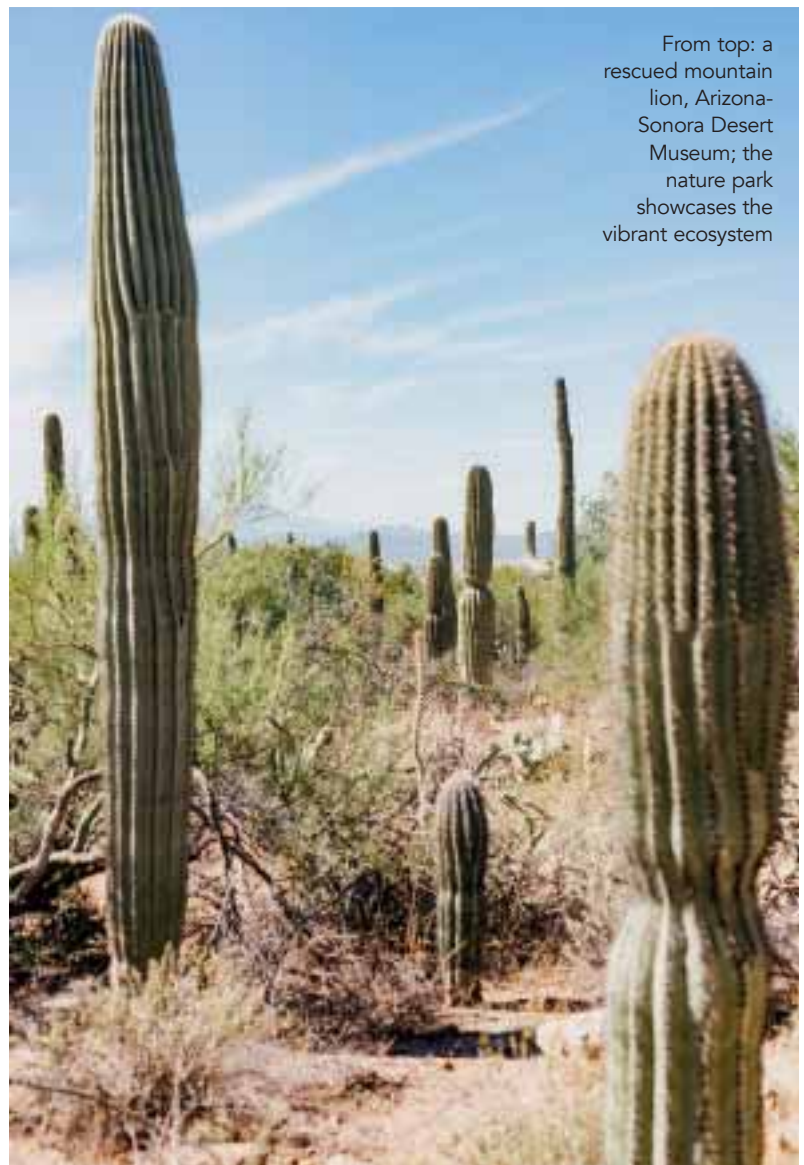
WHERE TO STAY

The Citizen Hotel A welcome new addition to Downtown, this boutique hotel occupies the 100-year-old former headquarters of Tucson's first printing press. These days, the vibe is less industrious, more sybaritic thanks to complimentary daily wine tastings and pop-up art exhibitions. Its spacious rooms are lavished with thoughtful touches (the likes of bath salts and reading caddies on the deep soaking tubs) and take design cues from the desert landscape. Doubles from £208. *82 S Stone Ave, 00 1 520 335 5064, thecitizenhoteltucson.com*

Hacienda del Sol Guest Ranch Resort A sprawling retreat in the foothills of the Santa Catalina Mountains, with three swimming pools and a lavish spa. It has played host to many a Golden Age Hollywood star, but the exotic gardens are the true stars of the show here, dotted with Moorish patterned tiles, Mexican-style shrines and bubbling fountains. Doubles from £214. *5501 N Hacienda Del Sol Rd, 00 1 520 299 1501, haciendadelsol.com*

Hotel Congress Music venue, museum, cocktail bar, local landmark – The Coronet is one of Arizona's oldest and quirkiest properties. Ghost stories swirl around its 39 antique-filled bedrooms, live jazz and artisan mezcals flow in the wood-panelled Century Room, and hearty All-American breakfasts get devoured in the Cup Cafe. Tap room bartender Tiger has a tale or two to tell, having worked here since 1959. Doubles from £112. *311 E Congress St, 00 1 520 622 8848, hotelcongress.com*

JW Marriott Tucson Starr Pass Resort & Spa Some come to the hilltop resort for its Arnold Palmer-designed desert golf courses, others for the numerous hiking trails that thread through the surrounding countryside. But, arguably, the standout feature here is the vast, panoramic terrace, where guests gather for sunrise Navajo rituals and nightly tequila toasts around the fire pits. Doubles from £290. *3800 W Starr Pass Blvd, 00 1 520 792 3500, marriott.com*



From top: a rescued mountain lion, Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum; the nature park showcases the vibrant ecosystem



Clockwise from top left: miso ramen, Kukai; Los Milics Vineyards; street art, Historic Fourth Avenue; nopales al pastor; Whiskey Del Bac father and daughter Amanda and Stephen



Abundance isn't the first word that comes to mind when you think of the desert. But then, the Sonoran Desert is something of an ecological oddball. Various superlatives are attached to this ecoregion, which spans parts of the south-western US and northern Mexico: the planet's greenest and wettest desert, the only one to experience both a summer and a winter monsoon season (July to September, and December/January). Its microclimates range from thorn scrub valleys to patches of pine-oak forest at the highest altitudes, which are given the poetic name of 'sky islands'.

Even in downtown Tucson – where vibrant murals bloom over warehouse buildings, and neon signs flash on art deco theatres – the great outdoors never feels far away. Sure, it's a cultured, cosmopolitan, left-leaning university town. But driving along its long, straight boulevards, the jagged blue outline of the mountains is a constant sight, with five different ranges encircling it. In no time at all, you're in the foothills, kicking up dust on a hiking trail, keeping an ear out for rattlesnakes. It's a landscape that provided the backdrop for Hollywood Westerns, dominated by towering pillars of saguaro cacti (the Sonoran is the only place in the world where this species grows in the wild).

Don't be fooled by their prickly exterior; cacti can be delicious. In the botanic gardens of Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, resident ecologist Erin Riordan points out which varieties are edible. 'Organ pipes,' she begins, gesturing at a candelabra-like cluster of spiky limbs, 'produce this red fruit that can grow as big as a tennis ball. Some people say it tastes better than watermelon.' The buds that sprout from cholla, a shorter cactus furred in dense white barbs, resemble baby artichoke and are ideal tossed into salads. The summer-ripened buds of the prickly pear – paddle cacti – are juiced into antioxidant-packed, magenta-hued nectars and jams by Arizona Cactus Ranch. Their pads, known as nopales, are akin to okra when cooked. After a few days in Tucson, it's normal to become something of a cactus connoisseur.

Velvet mesquite trees are another signature of Sonoran desert-to-dish fare. The pods can be eaten raw – 'desert edamame', Erin calls them – or ground into flour to impart a subtly smoky, earthy flavour to baked goods, like the chewy, brown sugar cookies at Flora's Market Run. Mesquite-fired cuisine, meanwhile, is the speciality of Midtown restaurant Tito & Pep, bringing a Sonoran slant to dishes like pork chops and charred aubergine.

Perhaps more surprising is the use of the wood in a local distillery. As a successful furniture designer, Stephen Paul was well acquainted with the beauty of mesquite – its reddish hue and thick, rippling grain. Then, back in 2006, his wife posed a question: could you make Scotch with it? Curiosity piqued, Stephen bought a five-gallon copper still and experimented at home, using mesquite scraps from the design business instead of peat to smoke malting barley.

'I never imagined it would lead to this,' he smiles, leading the way through the gleaming warehouse where Whiskey Del Bac's award-winning single malts are now crafted. 'I love that these whiskeys really express where we come from,' adds his daughter and co-founder Amanda. 'As a kid, I grew up chewing on mesquite pods, and the smell of it at barbecues and campfires. "Mesquite'd, not peated", we always like to say.'

As for those chiltepins encountered in Mission Garden, they crop up in similarly unexpected places: lending a subtle heat to local brand Monsoon's artisan chocolates, encrusted on rounds of goats' cheese at Rillito Park Farmers Market, or spiking the cold brew at coffee shop-cum-mezcal bar Exo Roast Co. It's this commitment to preserving heritage foodways – including putting indigenous ingredients to inventive new uses – that saw Tucson crowned the United States' first Unesco City of Gastronomy in 2015. —————>>





WHERE TO EAT

Prices are for a three-course meal for two, excluding drinks, unless stated
5 Points Trendy café and market with a backdrop of exposed brick and upcycled furniture, where dishes revolve around its organic bakery items – from doorstep breakfast sandwiches to mouth-watering cakes. Check out the in-house shop stocked with natural wines and artisan-made goodies, perfect for souvenirs. Brunch dishes from £8. 756 S Stone Ave, 00 1 520 623 3888, 5pointstucson.com

Baja Café Epic south-western breakfasts await in either branch of this friendly diner. It's easy to get overwhelmed by the sheer length of the menu (13 types of egg benedict, no less), but their cult classics include a stack of snickerdoodle pancakes, chewy, caramelised Liège waffles or the smoky *huevos rancheros*. Breakfast dishes from £4.35. 2970 N Campbell Avenue/7002 E Broadway Blvd, 00 1 520 344 7369, bajacafetucson.com

BOCA Tacos y Tequila As a James Beard Award semi-finalist and *Top Chef* contestant, Maria Mazon is one of Tucson's rising culinary stars. Her highly original, east-meets-west flavour combinations elevate tacos (19 varieties), quesadillas and salsas. Who knew cardamom and chipotle, ginger and tomatillo, or kumquat and habanero, were matches made in heaven? Try grilled edible cactus *nopalitos* for a true taste of the Sonoran Desert. Tacos from £3. 533 N 4th Ave, Tucson, 00 1 520 777 8134, bocatacos.com

Charro Steak & Del Rey Downtown's popular 'ranch-to-table' spot sources its 100 per cent grass-fed beef from Montana and fires cuts on a mesquite grill. Nor is seafood overlooked, with dishes like tequila-d trout, fresh oysters and ceviche (all Monterey Bay Certified). Kick off with the guacamole, mixed up tableside. From £64. 188 E Broadway Blvd, 00 1 520 485 1922, charrosteak.com

The Coronet An atmospheric courtyard restaurant exemplifying the artsy vibe of Barrio Viejo. Proudly proclaiming local product partners, the menu is packed

with shareable small plates, canned gourmet seafood, and cuisine influences that globe-hop from Iran to Thailand. Old-school pub Nightjar is in the same building. From £87. 198 W Cushing St, 00 1 520 222 9889, coronettucson.com

Flora's Market Run Half-restaurant, half-grocery store and bakery, Flora's excels at breakfast, dinner and everything in-between (including a daily happy hour). There are couches and artisan coffee for the co-working crowd, colourful salad bowls for the health-conscious, or chunky dips with freshly baked bread to share over wine. In-house pickling and curing are specialties – try the fermented tomato wood-fired pizza or a charcuterie platter. Mains from £11. 2513 E 6th St, 00 1 520 771 9141, florasmarket.com

Kukai Proof that Tucson can master more than Mexican cuisine. The city's tastiest ramen, rice bowls and sushi, as well as lesser-known Japanese street food staples like *onigiri* (rice balls) and *takoyaki* (a deep-fried, octopus-filled pancake), are served out of a shipping container in hipster MSA Annex. Sushi from £8. 267 S Avenida del Convento, 00 1 520 367 5982, eatkukai.com

Maynards Market & Kitchen Housed in a former train depot, there's a subtly steam punk aesthetic to this Downtown restaurant. Sustainably sourced, Sonoran produce shines on the menu, whether that's heritage grains in its handmade pasta, or chicken from nearby Top Knot Farms, plus an array of Arizonan wines and sake. Don't skip dessert: Maynard's grown-up spin on soft-serve is doused in a divine miso-white chocolate sauce and pomegranate. From £127. 400 N Toole Ave, 00 1 520 545 0577, maynardsmarkettucson.com

Zioeppe Chef Devon Sanner playfully fuses Italian and Mexican cuisine with delicious results. Think chiltepin-spiked pasta sauces, beef birria as a pizza topping or corn arancini combining corn and rice, doused with lime crema and queso fresco cheese. From £58. 6502 E Tanque Verde Rd, 00 1 520 888 4242, zioeppeaz.com

Clockwise from top left: Kukai chef Michael McCormack; breakfast chilli tacos; cult shop Hippy Gypsy; Charro Steak & Del Rey; view over central Tucson at dusk





Clockwise from top left: Cup Cafe's All-American breakfast; Barrio Bread; a signature loaf; Gates Pass sunset, Tucson Mountains; spinach and artichoke dip, Flora's Market Run; owner Nate Ares; El Guero Canelo's Sonoran dog; Sonoita-Elgin wine region; Flora's Animal-Style burger



DON'T MISS

Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum Don't read too much into the name 'museum' – instead, you can expect an outdoor botanic garden, zoo and nature park. Half an hour's drive from downtown Tucson, the 98-acre site replicates the various microclimates of the Sonoran, from grasslands to mountain woodland. As for wildlife, it's home to a rescued mountain lion and black bears. Entry £26pp.

2021 N Kinney Rd, desertmuseum.org

Etherton Gallery This small but perfectly formed paean to fine art photography is tucked away on one of Barrio Viejo's (meaning 'old neighbourhood') dusty side streets. Offering both a permanent collection and a range of changing exhibitions throughout the year, black-and-white prints by 20th-century greats sit alongside shots by contemporary and local talents in a variety of media.

340 S Convent Ave, ethertongallery.com

Mission Garden An Eden-like site with desert-adapted heritage fruit trees and traditional heirloom crops at the foot of Sentinel Peak. Here, carefully-tended garden plots act as time-capsules for 4,000 years of local history, with the emphasis on preservation and revival. Suggested donation £4.30pp; tours £4.30pp. 946 W Mission Lane, missiongarden.org

Rillito Park Farmers Market Tucson's largest year-round farmers market is held every Sunday, when locals descend on the Rillito racetrack grounds to pick up fresh artisan produce, catch cooking demos and graze on street food that reflects the city's multicultural population (look out for the Salvadorian, Ukrainian and Turkish stalls). Stock up on Sonoran specialities like mesquite jelly, desert honey and goats' milk soap.

4502 N 1st Ave, heirloomfm.org/markets/rillito-park

San Xavier del Bac Mission One of Tucson's oldest structures and a National Historic Landmark since the Sixties, this 18th-century Spanish Catholic church remains a popular pilgrimage site today. Its white adobe facade cuts a dramatic form against the desert backdrop, while the interior is covered in colourful frescoes and statuary.

1950 W San Xavier Rd, sanxaviermission.org

If any single Tucsonan embodies this, it's Don Guerra, an elementary school teacher turned James Beard Award-winning baker. At his city-centre 'bread lab' Barrio Bread (an upgrade from selling out of his garage, as he did for many years), loaves are exclusively made from grains grown in southern Arizona. Partnering with local seed bank Native Seeds/SEARCH enabled him to source a dozen heirloom varieties, even successfully lobbying farmers to reintroduce White Sonora ('our mother wheat'), which had been commercially abandoned for its low yields.

'It's all about designing bread from the seed up.' Mouthwatering malty aromas waft from the oven as Don explains his mission. 'Bread isn't just something functional to hold sandwiches together; it should have flavour. I think of the grain like paints on a palette.' He grabs some warm loaves, begins to carve off slabs, comparing the nutty flavour of Red Fife to the velvety, rounded, almost creamy mouthfeel of Desert Durum. Loaves come with a saguaro stencilled on top in flour. It's in this very region that North America's first wheat fields were planted, Don explains, back in the 17th century. 'We talk about terroir with wine, so why not bread?' he suggests.

Besides taste and artistry, his aim for Barrio Bread is also social: to nurture a culture of artisan bread —>>



From top: salad sampler, Flora's Market Run; desert highway; prairie dog





This page, clockwise from top: Kukai tables; cacti-strewn hillsides; chicken, squash, aubergine, Maynards; Hacienda del Sol. Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Dos Cabezas wine; makers Todd and Kelly; Rollies tacos; inside Dos Cabezas; adobe houses, Barrio Viejo; at Rollies; fish tacos, Taqueria Pico de Gallo; its colourful exterior; The Citizen Hotel's Moniqua Lane; potato 'rollies'

FOOD GLOSSARY

Chiltepin Small, round, extra-hot chilli pepper that resembles a red berry

Chipotle Smoked chilli pepper used for seasoning

Horchata Drink of sweetened rice milk, served over ice, often flavoured with cinnamon and vanilla

Huevos rancheros Fried eggs on a corn tortilla, smothered with warm salsa, beans or meat – a breakfast favourite

Machaca Dried, spiced meat, usually beef or pork

Membrillo A thick, sweet, jammy paste made from boiling quince

Nopalitos The edible pads of prickly pear cactus, which are typically either grilled or boiled

Pan dulces Translating as 'sweet bread', this is the umbrella term for Mexican pastries introduced by Spanish settlers and further popularised during the 19th-century French occupation

Pico de Gallo Classic Mexican salsa made from chopped tomatoes, onions, peppers, lime juice and coriander leaves – typically spooned over tacos

Poblano Mild-tasting green chilli pepper

Raspado Shaved ice, topped with various sweet condiments, fruit or syrups

Salsa macha Condiment from Veracruz, Mexico, made from dried peppers, nuts and oil

Tamale Traditional Mesoamerican dish made of *masa* (corn-based dough), steamed in a husk or banana leaf, which can either be discarded before eating or used as a plate

Tomatillo Also known as the Mexican husk tomato, this tiny green fruit has a tangy, citrus-sweet flavour

making in Tucson, teach others how to make it at home and cultivate a sustainable, shortened 'grain chain'. This means working closely with field and farmer, he explains, as well as utilising the spent grains from local micro-breweries.

His talk of terroir calls to mind another crop Spanish missionaries introduced to the Sonoran: grapes. These days, some excellent wines are being made in Arizona, with the number of vineyards more than doubling in the past five years, yet it's very much under the radar. This disconnect is what prompted Jeanne and Pete Snell to open their riverside bar and bottle shop, Arizona Wine Collective, with tasting flights to encourage Tucsonans to try the wines being made on their doorstep. Pete points to a map on the wall, indicating the state's three main wine-growing regions: Willcox, Verde Valley and Sonoita-Elgin.

The latter is an hour's drive south of the city, and as the road winds higher, saguaros are replaced by rippling golden grassland and, eventually, neatly planted rows of vines. At Los Milics Vineyards, Colombian-Serbian owner Pavle Milic offers a sneak peek of his sleek new tasting room – a glass and steel structure that will rust to match the colour of the soil – before uncorking a few bottles.

All the wines are named after family members. 'This is a Sean Connery of wine,' he says of Oliver's 2020, a velvety, plummy syrah blend, while Sandra's 2021 is 'a vagabond of a wine', —————>>





Clockwise from top: The Coronet co-owner Sally Kane; Hotel Congress; Exo Roast Co serves coffee and mezcal; a room at Hotel Congress; historic pub Nightjar; a home in Barrio Viejo

more robust than your typical rosé due to using the saignée method ('bleeding' off liquid from a tank of juice for red wine), plus a little oak ageing. What he's most excited about right now is experimenting with ageing wine in clay amphoras, rather than barrels, to bring a purity and zippy freshness to the 2022 harvest.

With his tattoos and Queens accent, Milic isn't your traditional vineyard patriarch. He was waiting tables in Scottsdale when a chance encounter with a financial backer started the process of bringing his viticultural dream to reality. His down-to-earth manner and maverick spirit are typical of Sonoita-Elgin winemaking.

Just up the road, at Dos Cabezas WineWorks, husband-and-wife team Todd and Kelly Bostock believe it's a boon to be free of the expectations or rules that weigh on many Old World producers. It lets them explore their own 'rule-breaking blends' of lesser-known grapes and unconventional formats, such as a canned sparkling rosé. 'Cans get to go to all the cool places, the places beer normally gets to go, like camping trips,' Todd laughs from beneath his baseball cap. 'Being pretentious takes all the fun out of it, and we just want people to feel comfortable and enjoy our stuff.'

It gratifies him to see 'ranchers who are normally Bud Light guys coming in here for a rosé' and, in a fittingly high-low fusion, wine tastings here take place over wood-fired pizzas. Topping include salty Oaxacan cheese with corno di toro peppers, or pepperoni and *salsa macha*, with a sprinkling of Colima salt.

As suggested by those ingredients, and the Spanish names of these wineries, Mexico is tantalisingly close – a mere 20 miles from Sonoita-Elgin. From Tucson, the border lies at half the distance of Arizona's State capital, Phoenix. In fact, this region was part of Mexico for decades, before being sold to the US in 1854. The cultural influence of its southern neighbour is evident in Tucson's older neighbourhoods, like Barrio Viejo, with its garlanded madonnas and saints staring from street-corner shrines, and brightly coloured adobe casitas. A *Día de Muertos* (Day of the Dead) parade is one of the city's biggest annual events.

This closeness also plays out on the plate, of course. For the most authentic Mexican food in town, head to no-frills roadside joints of Tucson's South Side, unofficially known as 'America's Best 23 Miles of Mexican Food'. Fish tacos at Taqueria Pico de Gallo are a must (a sip of their chilled, sweet rice milk *horchada* is the perfect accompaniment to the fiery salsa), followed by fruit-topped, syrup-drenched *raspados* at Oasis. La Estrella Bakery's counter is heaped with freshly baked *cuernos de queso* cheese horns and *pan dulces*, named according to whatever shape the sweet dough is moulded into, from *conchas* (shells) to *lenos* (logs).

Other South Side outlets merge Mexican and US influences to create fusion fare unique to these borderlands – such as Sonoran dogs, diverging from the classic by wrapping the sausage in bacon and topping with pinto beans and jalapeños (El Guero Canelo's are widely regarded as the best). Or Rollies, where the eponymous dish is a birria-stuffed taco, accompanied by cheese sauce, whereas the enchiladas come flat, not rolled as you'd normally get in Mexico.

'The kinship of Arizona and Sonora, Mexico, is special,' Monique Lane reflects over cocktails in the lobby bar of her Downtown boutique pad, The Citizen Hotel. 'We're an area unto ourselves. We can't separate ourselves from them, nor would most of us want to,' she says. 'We embrace the fact we're a borderlands town.'

Fittingly, a popular concoction at the bar is the Basin & Range, made from mezcal, desert sage and creosote. The latter is another local plant, one that blooms yellow and releases a resinous, citrusy scent during those rare but intense bouts of rainfall. 'That,' Monique sighs, 'is the smell of the desert. The Sonoran in a glass.' □
Food and Travel travelled courtesy of Visit Tucson visittucson.org

TRAVEL INFORMATION

Framed by the Sonoran Desert, Santa Catalina Mountains and Santa Cruz River, vibrant Tucson is the county seat of Pima County in southern Arizona. Time is seven hours behind GMT and currency is the US Dollar. There are no direct flights from the UK to Tucson International Airport, but nearby Phoenix Sky Harbor is easily accessible. Flights take 11 hours.

GETTING THERE

British Airways offer direct flights from London Heathrow to Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport, a 1.5-hour drive from Tucson. ba.com
Virgin Atlantic fly from Heathrow to Tucson International Airport with a stopover in Utah's Salt Lake City International Airport. virginatlantic.com

RESOURCES

Visit Tucson, the local tourism board, is your official guide, full of inspiration and information to help you plan your trip. visittucson.org

