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NATURAL



GLOBAL FLAVOURS.

BEAUTY

Home to breathtaking wonders like the Grand Canyon, Arizona is also filled with history that's evident in much of its food and wine culture. Just ask **Max Brearley**, who takes in the sights, sounds and tastes of this wondrous US state.

PHOTOGRAPHY SARAH HEWER



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**“AND WHILE
THE CITY SPRAWLS
YOU’RE NEVER TOO
FAR AWAY FROM
THE MOUNTAIN
RANGES.”**

The Grand Canyon State, Arizona could as easily be The Saguaro State. These towering cacti dot the Sonoran Desert, emblematic of a state that has a food culture that’s more than 4000 years old. And it’s a food culture that isn’t contained within a border, the lines between south-western and Mexican ever fluid.

PHOENIX

Dubbed the Valley of the Sun, Phoenix’s desert heat has long been its draw. And while the city sprawls you’re never too far away from the mountain ranges that ring it. Akin to a welcome to country, the Heard Museum explores Native American art and culture, feeding my understanding that Arizona is inextricably linked to its diverse heritage. A quarter of the state is reservation, the lands of the south once part of New Spain.

At **Ocotillo** we take lunch under a Palo Verde tree, the dirt turned yellow with falling blossom. The restaurant’s namesake, a hardy desert plant, flowers crimson red on the restaurant’s borders. Roast chicken, imbued with the smoke of *mesquite* wood, serves as a welcome to Phoenix.

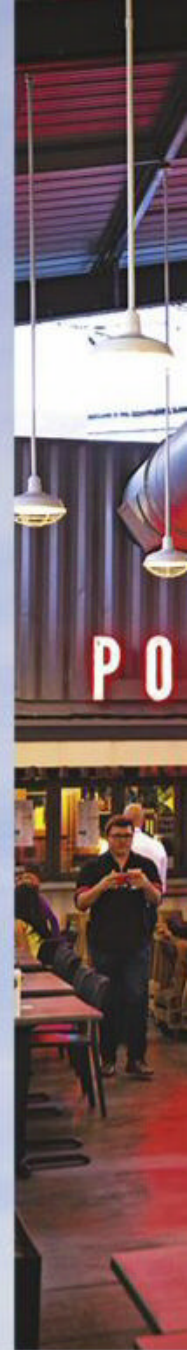
At wine store **Hidden Track**, co-owner Craig Dziadowicz gives us the lay of the

land on the Arizona wine scene and the city, saying just a few years ago Downtown emptied at clocking off, but a rise in urban dwellers is seeing change.

Food vendors ply their trade from sea containers around a central courtyard at The Churchill, the streets around it dotted with murals. A block over, **Angels Trumpet** sates both a thirst for local craft beer and a Baja fish taco. A short walk away, **Arizona Wilderness Brewing Co’s** downtown outpost bustles midweek. At **Phoenix Public Market** we grab breakfast. On weekends it comes to life with its open-air market.

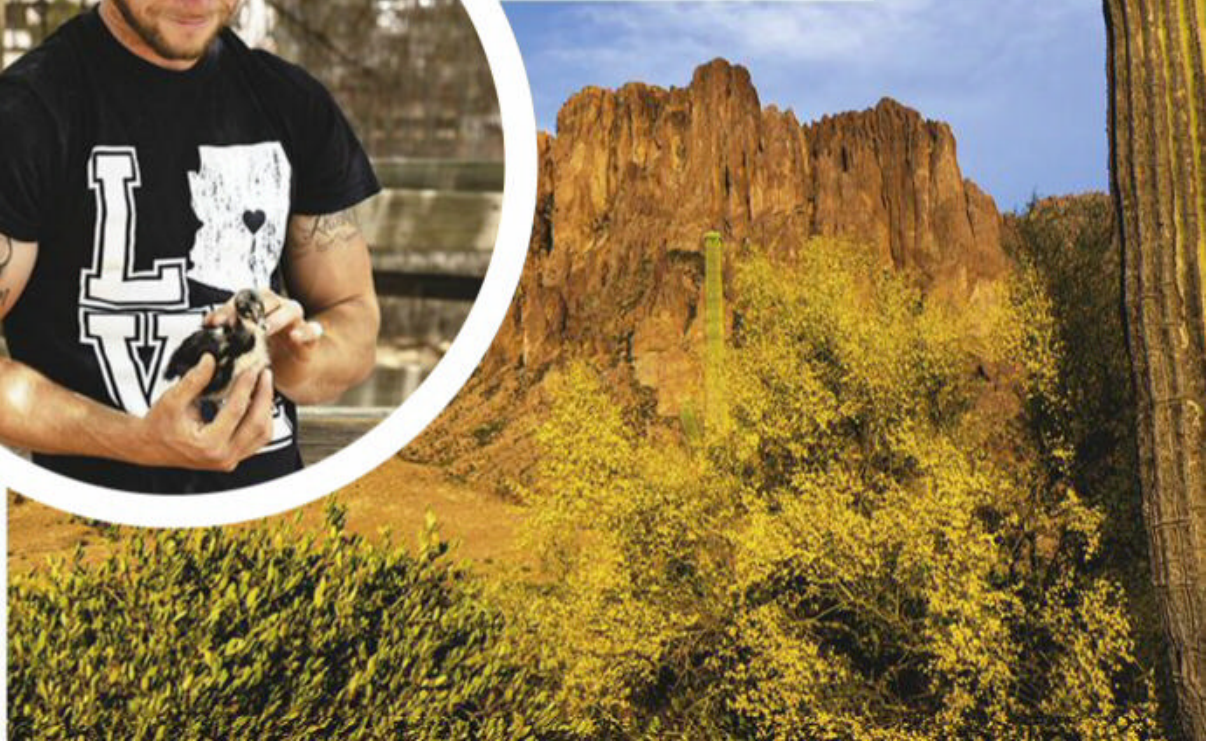
Chef Silvana Salcido Esparza has redefined modern Mexican cuisine for Phoenixians. Beyond the menu at **Barrio Cafe Gran Reserva**, the tiny restaurant’s walls are daubed with scenes of Mexican culture, showcased in the city’s vibrant mural, in one of its most artistic neighbourhoods. Bad margaritas are forever banished, thanks to a combination of excellent tequila and a modern sensibility to mixology.

The Farm at South Mountain, 15 minutes from Downtown, houses three





CLOCKWISE: Arizona Wilderness Brewing Co; Lost Dutchman State Park; urban farmer Billy Anthony of The Farm at South Mountain (inset); Baja fish tacos at Angels Trumpet; The Churchill at Pobrecito; sip on an original Tequila Sunrise at The Biltmore (inset); Phoenix Public Market
OPPOSITE: Agritopia's picturesque landscape





CLOCKWISE: mod-Mexican at Penca; Barrio Bread's Don Guerra; alfresco drinks at Hotel Congress; barrel cactus; Penca's nopales taco (inset); Emma Zimmerman from Hayden Flour Mills; top brews at Exo Roast Co.; fresh pics at Schnepf Farms. OPPOSITE: taco stop in Tucson.



GLOBAL FLAVOURS.

restaurants over 10 acres. Looking over the market garden, breakfast at **Morning Glory Cafe** takes in roasted vegetables, with eggs over easy and other homestyle classics. Farmer Billy Anthony tells us the garden grows staples for casual eateries and more specialised produce, like ice plant, for their fine diner **Quiessence**.

Heading east to Mesa, agricultural and urban pockets mingle. At **Schnepf Farms**, Arizona's largest producer of peaches, third-generation farmer Mark Schnepf points out market gardens, fairground rides and a tame herd of deer as he weaves through the estate on his golf buggy. The main event: picking your own tree-ripened peach. Nothing compares. A labour of love for Mark's wife Lori, a village of refurbished vintage trailers is aptly named The Cosy Peach.

Hayden Flour Mills is a must for the avid or would-be baker. Jeff Zimmerman's vision was to resurrect both a mill and pre-industrial wheat. Daughter Emma joined the family business and caught the bug. Standing amidst swaying wheat, she waxes lyrical about heritage grains, and in particular, White Sonora wheat grown by their neighbours, the Sossaman family. While there's food politics at play in growing heritage wheat, importantly, you taste the difference. Beyond tours and product sales, Hayden Flour Mills teaches baking and pasta classes.

Slowly encircled by urban development, the Johnston family took a visionary move, their farm becoming **Agritopia**.

Integrating organic market gardens, community plots, homes and a hub for creative businesses, it's been dubbed as an 'agri-hood'. Locals head to the farm shop which runs on an honour system.

Barnone houses artisan florists, makers of paper goods; tap house **12 West Brewing**; **Garage-East**, an urban winemaker; woodfired pizza joint **Fire and Brimstone**; and even a bespoke gunsmith.

The Biltmore was once the haunt of the Kennedy family and Irving Berlin – he's said to have penned 'White Christmas' by the pool. Opened in 1929, the distinct vision of Albert Chase McArthur and Frank Lloyd Wright still shines. For those with a taste for history, it's the birthplace of the Tequila Sunrise.

TUCSON

The first UNESCO City of Gastronomy in the US, Tucson's food culture is as old as 4000 years. On the outskirts, **Mission Garden** is laid into sections representing pre-settlement, Spanish missionaries and even Chinese heritage, recognising those who travelled west to build the railroads. Our guide picks fruit from a barrel cactus, urging us to eat it raw. Found on menus throughout the city, it's tart and thankfully without spines.

Mesquite is a motif that runs through the food of the south west. At **Tito & Pep** chef John Martinez tends his *mesquite*-fired grill, and at **Whiskey Del Bac** the Dorado single malt is imbued with tones of the native wood in the malting.

On a Saturday morning, a line stretches down the block at **Barrio Bread**. Don Guerra is one of America's best-known bakers. After building and selling a bakery, teaching, and then returning to his passion, Guerra's mission is now beyond bread: to strengthen the local grain economy and food network in tandem. Guerra is deeply committed to White Sonora wheat, we learn, as he tears off a piece of *mesquite* loaf. It's worth a wait.

Hip downtown eatery **Penca Restaurante** offers a modern treatment of Mexican staples such as *chilaquiles*, traditionally a dish of leftovers and preserved *nopales* (cactus). The mezcal list is notable, but for the craft beer-faithful **Pueblo Vida Brewing Co** down the street has the goods.

Everyone has their low-key *taqueria*; **Pico de Gallo** is the locals' tip. Maybe it's the intense *lengua* (beef tongue), or the super-sweet *horchata* (rice milk). The Sonoran hot dog at James Beard-winning **El Guero Canelo** is a must. A soft Mexican *bolillo* bun holds a bacon wrapped hot dog, onions, tomato and pinto beans. Salsa, mustard and mayo top things off.



GLOBAL FLAVOURS.

It leaves me wanting, yet incapable of, a second.

The Hotel Congress is Tucson's party hotel, the choice for bands playing the Rialto theatre across the street. Good booze, *ouija* boards and a curious history are all part of the charm. It's also the scene of the 1934 capture of gangster John Dillinger.

Crossing the tracks to the Warehouse Arts District, there are vintage stores and a steady breakfast trade at **Exo Roast Co.** Its bar allows you to burn the candle at both ends with yet more mezcal. For a modern diner, the **Welcome Diner** excels, from the house burger to the warmest service.

WINE COUNTRY

En route to Sonoita, the southern wine region, we roll through mobile border checkpoints, just 50 kilometres from Mexico. Here we find **Dos Cabezas** and **Callaghan Vineyards**, accomplished, traditional makers. At off-grid winery **Rune**, we arrive at the cellar door – a bar under a shade cloth – five minutes after closing. "Well we're closed but as long as you don't mind drinking with me, then we're in business," says our host Jacob, already pouring. A viticultural vista of

desert plains, ringed by mountain ranges, it's far removed from home.

The state's viticultural north is centred on Cottonwood, 165 kilometres north of Phoenix. Tasting rooms line the Main Street, such as **Merkin Vineyards** from Tool frontman-turned-winemaker James Maynard Keenan. The tasting room is also a farm-to-table osteria and much of the produce is grown by Keenan's father, Mike. In Jerome, a hilltop town, 13 kilometres from Cottonwood, we find **Caduceus Cellars** and wine incubator **Four Eight Wineworks**. Keenan has a hand in both.

ROAD TO THE CANYON

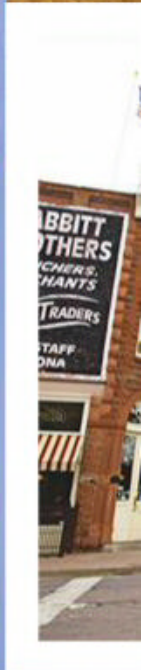
On the road to Flagstaff the terrain changes: desert gives way to red rock, towering Mesas and Ponderosa pines. Sedona is famed for its rock formations and its supposed energy vortexes. On hot days the swimming hole at Slide Rock State Park offers cool relief.

Just off historic Route 66, at Holbrook, we turn into a suburban street. Against a pick-up truck a sign reads 'Arizona Sake'. Atsuo Sakurai brews sake on a home-rigged-garage set-up. Having sampled it at **Nobuo**, a Phoenix restaurant specialising in omakase, we're going straight to the source. **Sakurai**, unsurprisingly, is something of a local celebrity and curiosity.

As we gain elevation, the landscape changes and the temperature drops. Flagstaff is surrounded by snowcapped peaks and is the gateway to the Grand Canyon, a university town gaining recognition for its food scene. At **Pizzicletta**, next door to **Mother Road Brewing** (with a second site inside Dark Sky Brewing Co.) we settle on a counter seat in view of the oven. A wood-fired thin crust plus good organic ingredients is the simple equation at play here. A winner. At **Shift**, pastry chef and owner Dara Wong offers a light modern menu, an alternative to hearty mountain fare.

There's an air of adventure at **Under Canvas**, just 25 minutes from the Grand Canyon South Rim entrance. Stylishly adorned tents with small wood stoves and a bed that offers a glorious night's sleep could keep you away from the modular teepee clubhouse that hosts nightly activities, a restaurant and bar.

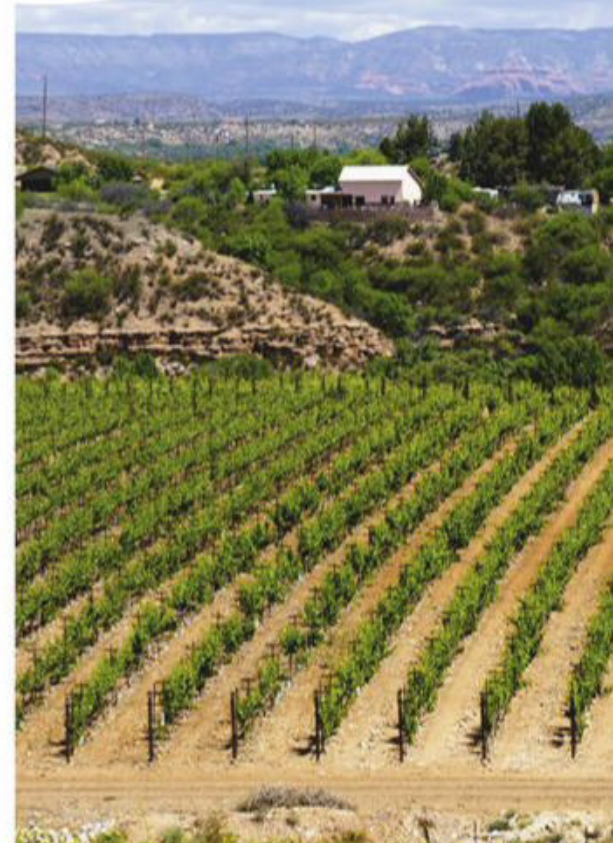
Amidst the throng of tourists in their constant point-click-walk cycle, peering and posing along the canyon edge, it's still possible to find space to meditate on what's before you, to put away the phone and just watch as the light changes. I've seen the canyon before. I've still not hiked down into it, only peered from above. But when I return it will be with a better idea of what Arizona is about, with a hunger to see and taste more. ✕



d.

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CLOCKWISE: sampling drops from Rune Wines; Flagstaff's street scene; Merkin Vineyards Osteria; friendly faces at Shift; where you can dine on scallop, pea and prosciutto (inset); Rune Wines' desert vibes; the Merkin Vineyards vines; camping in the Grand Canyon; cool off at Slide Rock State Park. **OPPOSITE:** magical views in Sedona.

