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ADVENTURE



TASTE OF TUCSON Clockwise from top: Hacienda Del Sol Guest Ranch Resort lamb and chef; Downtown Tucson Bike Tour; desert; and chollas

RACK OF LAMB AND CHEF, HACIENDA DEL SOL GUEST RANCH RESORT; BIKE TOUR, DOWNTOWN TUCSON BIKE TOUR; CHOLLA, GIGI RAGLAND; DESERT, VISIT TUCSON

Take a Bite Out of Tucson

The border city, honored as a UNESCO World City of Gastronomy, is a smorgasbord of unusual heritage foods

BY GIGI RAGLAND

Tall Saguaro cacti, roadrunners, tumbleweeds, desert, mountains. Those are the images we associate with Tucson. Not food—until now.

Tucson, recently the first American city to be named a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World City of Gastronomy, has a 4,000-year history of cultivating such desert edibles as cholla buds, agave, prickly pear fruit, mesquite flour, tepary beans and White Sonoran wheat. Those crops sustained ancient dwellers like the Tohono O’odham Nation, whose modern descendants still produce the same foods.

One thing’s for certain: You’ll never go hungry in Tucson. I spent the better part of a week wrapping my head, well, mouth around dishes like roasted nibs of corn, eggs scrambled with cholla, tamales, fruity pico de gallo, chile-marinated meats, prickly pear cactus-infused beer, mesquite-smoked whiskey and whatever else the creative chefs, farmers, ranchers, bee-keepers, distillers and brewers could dream up.

What you’ll discover are dishes that stem not only from the food source but also from the cultures that make up Tucson’s heritage, from Mission-era Mediterranean and American ranch-style cowboy food traditions to Northern Mexican, Sonoran, Native American and German immigrant influences.

In addition to preserving its food heritage, the city is a hub of culinary innovation, with James Beard Award-winning chefs creating everything from White Sonora wheat biscotti at Pizzeria Bianco to cholla bud escabeche at Janos Wilder’s Downtown Kitchen + Cocktails to traditionally baked loaves made of locally grown grains at Barrio Bread Bakery.

At the Tohono O’odham Nations’ San



DESERT OASIS Hacienda Del Sol Guest Ranch Resort

Xavier Farm Co-op store, where mesquite trees dot the property, you can find a variety of locally farmed foods like tepary beans (which are used in co-op catering dishes like minestrone soup), as well as such products as freshly baked mesquite cookies or raw honey.

But the culinary highlight of my visit was dinner at The Grill at the acclaimed Hacienda Del Sol Guest Ranch Resort. On a candlelit private patio, my group sat under a starry desert sky, feasting on a first course of Compressed Tohono O’odham watermelon with saba and local greens, followed by a salad of wheatberries, tepary beans and corn, flavored with a citrus vinaigrette. Then came a marinated green chile New York steak accompanied by Hayden Mills ancient barley with prickly



Tucson joins 17 other cities on UNESCO’s world gastronomy list, including Bergen, Norway; Ensenada, Mexico; Parma, Italy; Phuket, Thailand; and Jeonju, South Korea.

pear and rattlesnake beans. The grand finale: Sonoran wheat chocolate cake.

A recent multimillion-dollar expansion of the resort includes the addition of 32 luxury Catalina rooms and suites, named for the stunning views of the Santa Catalina Mountains and surrounded by beautifully landscaped walkways adorned with

sculptural artworks and Mexican tiles.

As I looked out at the expansive desert view, eyeing the variety of cacti and mesquite trees from my patio terrace, I reflected on a piece of wisdom from Phyllis, a teacher at the farm co-op: “They told me they have never tasted or eaten this before,” she said, chuckling, “and I said, ‘It’s in your backyard. You just need to know how to pick it and prepare it.’” **DLM**

HACIENDA DEL SOL GUEST RANCH RESORT

NEED-TO-KNOW INFO

STAY:
Hacienda Del Sol Guest Ranch Resort
haciendadelisol.com

PLAY:
Downtown Tucson Bike Tour
Cruise the historic neighborhoods along quiet streets

through colorful barrios.
tucsonbiketours.com
Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum
Learn about “The Sonoran Supermarket,” highlighting foods of the desert, with an ethnobotanist.
desertmuseum.org
Tucson Mission Garden Project
Visit this garden with plots that

represent heritage foods of 4,000 years ago.
tucsonsbirthplace.org
Tour San Xavier Farm Co-op
Walk the farm grounds a guided tour, learn about sustainable programs and visit the local products store to shop for special heritage foods.

sanxaviercoop.org

SIP LOCAL WHISKEY:
Tour Hamilton Distillers
Sample Whiskey del Bac and some of the company’s other artisanal whiskeys including a smokey mesquite variety.
hamiltondistillers.com