

They Don't Just Eat Tacos in Arizona



★★★★★ 0 RATINGS //

5 October 2012



When Jan Ross headed to Arizona, she knew she'd find standard Southwest staples such as beans and corn. What she didn't expect to find was a creative culinary scene unlike anything she had ever tasted.



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To those of us who travel for a living, culinary delights become crucial to enjoying the whole travel experience. We might just possibly start planning the next meal before we have completed the one in front of us.

Okay, we do. Often.

But those culinary delights, be they freshly baked éclairs from a storefront bakery in San Francisco or a brick-oven pizza from one of the hundreds of pizzerias in New York City, are an important part of a great journey. When we talk about past travels, we often mull wistfully over the perfect steak, the sublime pasta, that exquisite dessert. These lovely interludes help us to understand the local culture, whether it's a traditional, fresh Southern biscuit or, as we experienced recently, some spicy Southwest dish.



When I headed to Arizona for the first time, I had a vague idea that I would experience some Southwest cooking and I was fine with that. I liked tacos. Burritos would be good. And enchiladas? Fine. I had no idea that I was about to experience some of the most wonderful food I had ever tasted.

What I learned, after sampling a large variety of delicious meals, is that the cuisine of the American Southwest can vary greatly, but is often cuisine that is based on the rustic cooking of Spanish colonial settlers, cowboys, Native Americans and Mexicans.

The cooking is known for its spiciness, and the main dish is often accompanied by beans, sometimes refried beans, and corn is a staple of most of the recipes. Meals are often served with bread items prepared with corn such as corn cakes or tortillas. Meat is cooked until it is tender and juicy, often on a grill, and sometimes it is shredded and combined with sauce to create a barbecue dish. You can easily tell how popular this style of cooking has become by counting the number of restaurants now serving Mexican food in your hometown.



My first clue in Arizona that I was in for a culinary adventure was when I sat down at the [Wine Me, Dine Me](#) experience at the Southwest Bistro in the Hyatt Regency Scottsdale Resort and Spa at Gainey Ranch. Seated at a bar that overlooks the demonstration kitchen, where the head chef, Jason Ljunggren, works his magic with a diligent crew of assistants, I got to experience some of the unique flavors of the Southwest, complete with tequila and wine pairings. Served a tiny appetizer of barbecued beef on a tostado chip, I popped it into my mouth and nearly swooned with delight. The meat was tender, the chip was fresh and crunchy and please can I have another? Or possibly a dozen more?

After the appetizer, they brought out some corn chowder: a black bean and corn chowder with shrimp salsa on top and some sort of little fried bread things on the side that were scrumptious all by themselves. The main course was a grilled pork chop that was, in all seriousness, the most tender pork chop I have ever tasted.



But wait. Dinner is not the only fabulous meal in Arizona.

One thing I found absolutely amazing about Arizona, in addition to the fabulous food, was the cactus that are growing everywhere. I thought I had seen a large number of saguaro cactus until I drove to Tucson and saw huge forests of these incredible giants. Being the plucky survivors of the Southwest that they are, the residents have figured out ways to use these plants to create wonderful jellies and syrups. Both the saguaro and the prickly pear cactus have blossoms and fruit that can be boiled down, sweetened and made into lovely jelly and syrup. At the [Brittlebush Bar and Grill](#) in the Westin Kierland Resort and Spa, I took a chance for breakfast one morning and ordered cornbread French toast and prickly pear syrup. It was delicious.



Then, after a sumptuous dinner at [Ko'Sin](#) at the Sheraton Wild Horse Pass Resort in Chandler, I had an incredible dessert that included cactus jelly cookies, crème brûlée and caramel popcorn. Seriously? Caramel popcorn? I had to try this. And let me just tell you that those treats combined into the perfect taste sensation.

So, basically, when you head to Arizona, you can pretty much plan on eating some fabulous Southwestern delights.

And when you go, would you mind bringing me back some of those cactus jelly cookies, please? They won't take up much room in your carry-on. Honestly.

Come dine with us! We're celebrating the harvest this month on [Travel+Escape](#) with a special series, **CULINARY TRAVEL: GLOBAL FEAST!**

JAN ROSS



After a lifetime of travel, Jan Ross can pack a bag and hit the road with very little notice, although she will always have a little black dress and some snazzy shoes in there. She loves to travel with her husband of more than 35 years as he is a great photographer and she is often way too busy having fun to think about taking pictures. Active travel or relaxing, she is up for it all!

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