

ARIZONA'S

FRESH FOODIE TRAIL

By Sarah Miller

When you are next in Arizona, be sure to travel the state's Fresh Foodie Trail, just east of Phoenix, where you will discover lush peach orchards, citrus groves and olive mills. As you travel east from the city toward the trail, you may see wild horses splashing through the Low Salt River inside Tonto National Forest and notice the slower pace. This is where visitors relax as skyscrapers give way to campgrounds, desert, rivers, and an abundance of fresh foods. Here, fertile soil and abundant sunshine create a natural paradise.

The Fresh Foodie Trail is a farm-to-fork adventure meandering through the East Valley towns of Mesa, Gilbert and Queen Creek. High-end RV resorts and ample state and regional campgrounds offer the perfect base from which to explore the Native American, Hispanic, and Southwestern influences that dot the food landscape. Citrus blossoms and sagebrush scents mingle under turquoise skies. At night, fiery desert-mountain sunsets transform into star-filled darkness. Sleep well. In the morning, it's time to hit the trail.

Plenty of back-road food adventures wait in more than a dozen stops along the way. Pick fresh citrus, then head to a roadside stand for brisket. From fine dining to food trucks, taste distinct Southwest flavors. Choose your own itinerary on this self-guided tour. How will you end the day? Maybe sip some local vineyard wines or down a cold, sweet, Medjool date milkshake.

Schnepf Farms in Queen Creek, Arizona, is a stop on the Fresh Foodie Trail. In spring, juicy peaches are ripe and ready for picking.

INSET: Native mustangs are believed to have been brought in by Spanish ministries in the 16th century. Just before sunrise is the ideal time to spy them along the banks of the Low Salt River in Tonto National Forest.



Schnepf Farms, Queen Creek

Love peaches and Airstreams? Schnepf Farms in Queen Creek has both. Wander through the largest organic peach farm in Arizona with eight peach varieties across 300 acres, plus seasonal U-pick produce. Spring is prime peach-picking time at this fourth-generation farm. They also serve delicious farm-fresh breakfasts and lunch, plus gourmet goods in the country store.

Schnepf's on-site glampground, The Cozy Peach, has one of the largest collections of vintage Airstreams, Spartans and Silver Streaks—refurbished for overnight stays.

Queen Creek Olive Mill, Queen Creek

Step into a green oasis at Queen Creek Olive Mill, Arizona's only family-owned olive mill. Located at the base of the San Tan Mountains, the mill has an Italian-inspired restaurant and marketplace. Take Olive Oil 101 to discover how extra-virgin olive is made. Sample flavor-infused olive oils, balsamic vinegars and sauces and try the on-site roastery, Superstition Coffee, or sip wine under an olive tree.

Jalapeño Bucks, Mesa

Feel like a true Arizonan in this quirky, charming joint in the middle of a citrus grove. Cowboy or vaquero? Order spicy BBQ plates and burritos at this walk-up spot with a covered patio. Get a red chili pork quesadilla and maybe a quart of mango salsa to take home for later.

Steadfast Farms, Mesa

Those wishing to throw together a gourmet salad with just-plucked carrots, fresh spinach and juicy tomatoes can head to Steadfast Farms. Using sustainable and organic practices, this two-acre farm supplies produce, farm-fresh eggs and fresh-cut flowers. Stop by the store to stock up for later or relax in its new restaurant.

Hayden Flour Mills, Gilbert

Who can resist the smell of fresh-baked bread? That yeasty, comforting smell wafting in the air draws fans. Hayden Flour Mills has inspired a national fan club with write ups in Forbes and Food & Wine magazines. The family company uses freshly milled and heritage grains, perfect for whipping up your next batch of camp-side pancakes, and the onsite Sonoran Pasta Co. uses the mill's flour to make fresh pastas. If you're around on a Tuesday, be sure to wait for a special sourdough loaf delivered by James Beard Award-winning Baker Don Guerra.

Agritopia, Gilbert

Eat farm-fresh salads and sandwiches at this converted 1960s bungalow home turned retro-burger grill. Feast on Arizona beef burgers topped with farm-fresh vegetables. Joe's Farm Grill was featured on the Food Network's "Diners, Drive-Ins, and Dives." Joe's has a bit of everything—like all-day breakfast, or burgers and shakes.

The farm grill is part of Agritopia, an urban farm that grows USDA-certified organic specialty crops. Another Agritopia favorite is Garage East, a spot for specialty coffees and Arizona wines from their micro-winery.

More Authentic Arizona Foods

Outside the Fresh Foodie Trail, the Phoenix area is filled with authentic foods that reflect the region. Dive into a culinary scene that celebrates Southwestern, Native American and Mexican influences. From Navajo fry bread to prickly pear-infused cocktails—taste a desert palette of flavors.

LEFT: Friends gather under the olive trees for local wines and Italian-inspired bites at Queen Creek Olive Mill. **RIGHT:** Lines are often long at Don Guerra's Barrio Bread in Tucson, where fans can't get enough of his award-winning sourdough loaves. Diners at Hayden Flour Mills in Gilbert enjoy specialty sandwiches made with his fresh sourdough bread.



Barrio Bread/Discover Gilbert



Discover Gilbert



Compliments of Espiritu

Cultural Five-Star Find:

KAI

Where: *KAI at Sheraton Grand* at Wild Pass in Chandler—the only AAA five-Diamond and Forbes five-star restaurant in Arizona.

Menu: Highlights Arizona ingredients and Native American dishes.

The Vibe: Set against the Komatke Mountain Range, located within the Gila River Indian Community. Warm interior with local pottery and artwork.

Why KAI? KAI (means “seed” in the O’odham or Pima language)

Menu items feature ingredients from the Native Seed/SEARCH Foundation, the (Southwestern Endangered Arid Lands Research Clearing House), a program dedicated to preserving ancient lines of indigenous seeds that would otherwise be extinct.

Fry Bread Finds:

Fry Bread House, Phoenix Hope’s Fry Bread, Mesa

Fry Bread is a deep-fried flatbread that’s crispy on the outside and chewy on the inside. It can be stuffed with meat like a Navajo taco or made with sweet toppings for a dessert. Fry bread was created in the mid-to-late 19th century with the forced relocation of Native American tribes. The Navajo were given government provisions like flour, salt, baking soda, and lard. These ingredients were not part of their culture, but they improvised and created their own recipe: fry bread.



Tribal Art & Food Find:

Courtyard Cafe

Where: At the Heard Museum in Phoenix (museum admission not necessary for dining)

Menu: Lunch featuring Native American cuisine from multiple tribes.

The Vibe: Cozy, rustic interior. Outdoor courtyard with fountains adjacent to the museum.

Why Courtyard Cafe? Gourmet native foods like posolé (featured in Bon Appetit magazine) pair well with a day spent at the Heard Museum, a world-renowned collection of American Indian Art.

ABOVE: Meats and seafood are grilled over mesquite in the tradition of Northern Mexico of live-fire cuisine, a practice Chef Robert Centeno of Espiritu embraces. Arizona’s Hispanic heritage is celebrated with food, music and dance; visitors can experience a host of Cinco de Mayo celebrations in the springtime.



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ABOVE: On a hot day, sip a prickly pear lemonade. This bright-red fruit can be found in foods and drinks along the food trail.

Prickly Pear Picks

The prickly pear cactus grows bright-red fruit that many say tastes like a melon with a hint of bubblegum. Prickly pear fruit is commonly used by Southwestern tribes and in Mexican dishes. You'll find prickly pear-infused creations all around the East Valley—jams, jellies, sauces, ice cream—even drinks like prickly pear lemonade or margaritas.

Cowboy Cuisine: Saddle up to the bar (on real saddles) at the **Superstition Saloon and Restaurant** for a cold brew, sarsaparilla or prickly pear lemonade. Try their cowboy-sized burgers or killer-hot chili. After food, mosey around Tortilla Flat (pop. 6) to the mercantile, country store and museum—maybe even look for the Lost Dutchman's Gold Mine. If you're staying at the beautiful Lost Dutchman State Park, it's practically across the street.

San Tan Flat is another cowboy favorite in Queen Creek, Arizona, serving steaks, ribs, and mesquite chicken along with s'mores roasting and live music.

Mexican Tradition: Los Olivos Mexican Patio is a casual, 75-year plus Corral family tradition in Scottsdale with authentic chimichangas, fajitas, homemade flour tortillas and margaritas.

Best Northern Mexican Food: Visit **Espiritu** in downtown Mesa. Chef Roberto Centeno (winner of the Food Network's "Chopped") has an award-winning cooking style that includes live-fire Mexican cuisine. Mesquite grilling techniques bring out authentic flavors. Northern Mexico has excellent beef and phenomenal seafood from the Sea of Cortez—shrimp, scallops, oysters and fish. The cocktails are equally impressive, such as "The Phoenix" made with Chiltepin (fruity chili) mesquite honey syrup, prickly pear, lemon juice, and reposado Milagro (a blue agave tequila). Chef Roberto also can be found outside the kitchen, grilling in the Arizona mountains for special events. 