





REGIONAL AMERICAN CUISINE

The rich diversity of our backgrounds, traditions and ingredients from coast to coast define our culinary culture

As ACF chefs and educators, our culinary fundamentals stem from classical French instruction, from knife cuts to soup- and sauce-making. What's more exciting to see, though, is how these fundamentals intersect with, and are transformed by, America's culinary traditions, native ingredients and diverse methods of cookery — from region to region, city to city, town to town, person to person.

This year, the ACF is looking inward, taking a deep dive into our past, our present and our future. We're returning to our roots, and really examining what makes regional American cuisines so special — because by learning about others' culinary traditions, practices and prized ingredients, we can become better cooks ourselves. So expect to see more stories throughout the year about cooking in different parts of the country.

As a start, we go from the West, where we explore the cuisines of Arizona and Colorado, to the South, where we learn about the differences between Creole and Cajun cuisine. Read on, and enjoy.

Sonoran Swoon

Rooted in history, Arizona's cuisine is built on the desert

By Kelsey Casselbury

If you ask someone to name the top culinary cities in the U.S., the responses are predictable: New York City (obviously), Chicago (naturally) and New Orleans (of course), to name a few. Culinary professionals will likely pick out additional smaller but thriving destinations: Charleston, South Carolina; Austin, Texas; or Savannah, Georgia.

However, you're unlikely to find a city in Arizona in the rankings — yet, in 2015, the southern metropolis of Tucson, with its population of around 550,000, was the first American city to be named a "City of Gastronomy" by UNESCO. The criteria to earn this designation require an abundance of local ingredients used in traditional cooking; a vibrant gastronomy community with numerous traditional restaurants and/or chefs; and local know-how of traditional culinary practices and methods of cooking that have survived technological advancement, among other benchmarks.

Arizona's cuisine — often termed "Sonoran" after the desert that covers one-third of the state, including Tucson — doesn't have the national renown of California's coastal fare to the west or Tex-Mex cuisine to the east. However, "there is a unique intersection of food culture in Arizona that highlights Native American, Mexican and American cuisines," notes **Chef Dina Altieri, CEC, CCE, CHE** (above), director of culinary enterprises for UMOM New Day Centers in Phoenix and president of ACF Chefs Association of Arizona.

The state's rich culinary culture has been built up, piece by piece, over thousands of years of history. Its foundation rests on the ingredients that thrive in the dry, hot desert and the traditions of the Native American tribes who have lived — and still live — there. Sonoran cuisine has also collected impressions of those who came later, such as the Spanish, who arrived with Marcos de Niza in the mid-1500s. It's influenced by Mexico, thanks not only to its close proximity to the country, but also because the land was part of Mexico in the early 1800s. A half-century later, ranching took off, cementing beef and



cowboy cuisine as part of the culinary landscape.

(Students in Arizona are still taught "the five Cs" of Arizona's economy; cattle is one of them.)

Indeed, Arizona's culinary traditions were firmly established by the time it became the last contiguous state to be admitted to the Union on Feb. 14, 1912. More than a century later, modern-day chefs are still deriving inspiration from that alimentary history to build a culinary scene, both in Tucson and in other parts of the state, that is worthy of international attention.

From Classic ...

Spanish, Mexicans and 19th century ranchers may have influenced Arizona's cuisine, but if you want to get to its heart, you must focus on the land. "True Southwestern cuisine, to me, is looking at these foods that the desert has provided ... the food that people have been enjoying here for hundreds of years," says **Chef Danielle Leoni** (opposite), executive chef of



Above: Kampachi crudo by Chef Danielle Leoni.

The Breadfruit & Rum Bar in Phoenix. She focuses on three ingredients: corn, beans and squash, which are collectively known as “the Three Sisters” and have been a staple of the state’s agriculture as far back as 7000 BCE. While modern chefs may utilize an assortment of corns, including the sweet yellow and white varieties, the type traditionally grown by Native Americans is higher in protein, a bit nutty and — most notably — blue in color.

Those three ingredients, although staples, aren’t the only foods that the desert proffers a chef. “There is so much to learn about indigenous ingredients in Arizona such as cactus, wild herbs, seeds, chiles, mesquite and blue corn,” Chef Altieri says. “The foods that are growing wild here are truly unique and amazing.”

Chef Altieri’s favorite type of chile — a predominant ingredient in Southwestern dishes — is

the chiltepin, which is native to Arizona and Mexico. A member of her kitchen staff brought it in and, using a hand-carved chiltepin grinder, Chef Altieri crushed the peppers and added the powder to menudo. “What a special little chile!” Altieri commented.

... To Contemporary

When a chef focuses solely on classic, traditional dishes and ingredients, there’s always a risk of developing a stale menu. Chef Altieri encourages chefs to showcase their creativity by modernizing those classics.

“Focus on one or two distinctive ingredients and build the flavor profile from there,” she advises. “For example, consider creating a dish with tepary beans and pickled green chiltepins. Additionally, Mexican specialties, such as tacos, tamales and pozole, are celebrated on menus in the region, but switching up the classic garnishes, highlighting hyper-local ingredients, or bringing in new flavors can modernize these traditional dishes.”



These days, Arizona's cuisine is continually affected by those who have migrated to the state over the past century. According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2017 American Community Survey, only 23% of adults 25 years and older currently living in Arizona were born in the state. Additional data from the Census Bureau released in 2018 showed that Arizona has taken in 2.2 million new residents from other states since 2010, while losing 1.7 million to other states during that time.

"I don't think that we as Americans take enough time to understand the culture that we reside in," Chef Leoni says. "In Arizona, most of us are transplants. If I wasn't a chef, I probably wouldn't know anything about Southwestern cuisine."

Chef Leoni moved to Arizona when she was a teenager, but at Breadfruit & Rum, she takes her passion for Southwestern cuisine and intersects it with her passion for Jamaican food. She has all sorts of ideas swirling around in her head for potential Jamaican-Southwestern culinary marriages, starting with a version of Jamaican rice and peas that uses a native Southwestern bean, such as tepary. Then, "in Jamaica, spice is king, and anyone who thinks about Southwestern food is going to think about chiles," she muses. "We're going to give that chile experience, sourced from local farmers. It [might not be] just a hatch chile; it could be a red serrano."

Or, perhaps, she'll braise a beef brisket from a local rancher in northern Arizona with spicy chiles. "It's what you might think of as cowboy food, but it [will have] this Jamaican overtone to it by adding Jamaican allspice," Chef Leoni says. "We really like to put a lot of vegetables in [our food] — zucchini or summer squash, or acorn or butternut squash,"

maybe roasted or even smoked to give them a charred flavor.

No matter what the final dish looks like, Chef Leoni, who always has sustainability top of mind, is committed to cooking with local and seasonal ingredients as well as respecting the traditions of the Arizonans who came before her. "I take a step back and take the time to think about and read about the people who were here way before us," she says. "Those were the people who enabled us to be here today, and enabled this Southwestern culture to exist."

Kelsey Casselbury is a freelance writer, editor and designer who grew up in Arizona but now lives near Annapolis, Maryland.

Colorado Cuisine

A land-to-table approach

By Jennifer Olvera

Despite its dry climate and brief summer season, Colorado's culinary prowess shines. Whether it's the Palisade peaches that grow on the Western Slope; the wild turkeys, which were domesticated by the ancestral Puebloans; or the melons of Rocky Ford, the state's food history — and its bold, local flavors — run deep.

While these ingredients are native to the state, immigrants added to Colorado's food history. From the late 1880s to the early 1900s, German-Russian farm laborers brought their sugar beet expertise to the fields of Colorado. Japanese immigrants followed suit; the Bromley/Koizuma Hishinuma Farm in Brighton — listed on the National Register of Historic Places — stands as a reminder of their role in the once-flourishing beet industry.

Naturally, agriculture didn't stop there. Colorado's sun-drenched San Luis Valley in the south-central part of the state remains one of the most significant potato-growing regions in the U.S., the result of land grants offered in what was then northern Mexico. Love mushrooms? Between 2,000 and 3,000 varieties are grown in the state; the forests near Telluride are stippled with varieties from porcinis to chanterelles.

The list, as they say, goes on and on.



An Outdoorsy Influence

Long before “farm to table” became a buzzword, local Native Americans foraged the land for survival. It’s that spear-to-fire approach that laid the groundwork for one of Colorado’s most beloved pastimes: hunting. Though it was born from necessity, the time-honored sport is more popular than ever. In 2019, Colorado Parks and Wildlife saw a 20% increase in hunting and fishing license revenue, due to a change that simplified the process of procuring big-game licenses.

Not surprisingly, game is featured prominently on fine-dining tables statewide. That includes at Denver’s oldest surviving eatery: the taxidermy-trimmed Buckhorn Exchange, which dates back to 1893. In addition to the ubiquitous Rocky Mountain oysters (which, of course, aren’t oysters at all), you’ll find smoked bison sausage atop a bed of red chile polenta and boneless rattlesnake marinated in red chile and lime. It’s served atop a chipotle queso dip, with tortilla chips.

Fare from the “Centennial State” takes its cues from surrounding states like New Mexico, California

and Texas. “If I were to choose five words that embody Colorado’s culinary [influences], they’d be [green] chile, smoke, innovative, ranch, and local,” says **Chef Matthew Richardson, CEC**, executive chef of Cheyenne Mountain Country Club in Colorado Springs. “Mountain air, epic views and wildlife inform my cuisine.”

His farm-to-table menu is a showcase of the state’s fresh, local ingredients.

“As for flavoring and seasonings, Colorado — not surprisingly — goes in on big flavors,” he notes. “So you can expect a lot of spice rubs and smoked meat.”



Left: Chef John Folse’s Eggs à la Crème (credit: Ron Manville); Right: Pork cracklins at Toups’ Meatery in New Orleans (credit: Denny Culbert).

The Ultimate in Colorado Fare

Chef Richardson said while it’s hard to distill Colorado cuisine into a single dish, he considers elk the state’s quintessential ingredient, noting its rich gaminess pairs perfectly with fruit — berries in particular. At Cheyenne Mountain Country Club, Chef Richardson’s elk chops are graced with blackberry-Cabernet sauce, and served alongside brioche bread pudding dotted with walnuts, dried cherries and green chile.

Needless to say, Chef Richardson is in good company with his love for elk. Whether it’s the blackberry elk filet with local Jumpin’ Good goat cheese-farro risotto at Hearthstone

Restaurant in Breckenridge; Breckenridge's Briar Rose Chophouse & Saloon, where elk medallions are offset by mushroom demiglace; or The Fort Restaurant in Morrison, which serves a duo of four-ounce, grilled, bone-in elk chops with wild huckleberry preserves, there is a common theme: Big game reigns, and inky berries provide a vibrant, silky foil that pairs exceptionally well with it.

Of course, it's not only the fine-dining establishments that are in the know. Chef and "Colorado sausage czar" Jim Pittenger of Biker Jim's Gourmet Dogs left an indelible mark on the Denver street-food scene with his elk-jalapeno-cheddar sausage, which was embellished with cream cheese and crowned with soda-sweated onions — so much so that the dish earned him many food TV appearances, including on Chef Anthony Bourdain's show, "No Reservations."

From four-star affairs to street eats, from the fields and orchards, it's impossible to deny that sense of place plays a big role in Colorado cooking. "It's that rustic, sort of upscale, Rocky-Mountain-cabin cuisine that we're known for," Chef Richardson concludes.

Jennifer Olvera is a cookbook author and travel writer who is long been drawn to regional cuisine. She recently returned from an epic, food-filled adventure through Colorado, Utah and Arizona.

Defining Cajun and Creole Cuisine

Two chefs guide us through the intricacies of Louisiana's most famous cuisines

By Liz Barrett Foster

A visit to New Orleans is never complete without a sampling of its unforgettable cuisine. Walk into any restaurant in the Big Easy, and you can choose from a wide array of entrees that originated in the area: turtle soup, boudin, gumbo, blackened shrimp. But if your goal is to figure out which dishes are "authentically" Cajun or "authentically" Creole, it may be a long night.

While it's true that Cajun cuisine will almost always feature the "holy trinity" of white onion, green pepper and celery, and a final



topping of green onions and parsley, nowadays — because of the blending of cultures and cuisines — you can't always use those markers to definitively identify a Cajun dish. Plus, Creole cuisine also uses the "holy trinity" in many of its dishes. Confused yet?

Modern Cajun and Creole Cuisine

The days of "proper Cajun" and "proper Creole" are waning, according to **Chef Isaac Toups**, owner of Toups' Meatery in New Orleans. While he does prepare straight Cajun dishes, such as boudin, cracklins, jambalaya, dirty rice and Cajun (versus Creole) gumbo, Chef Toups also integrates other cuisines into his dishes. "There's more crossover nowadays," he says. "I don't follow a lot of rules in my restaurant. I also use some Spanish, Mexican and Vietnamese techniques. I'm always branching out."

While many people associate Cajun cuisine with spiciness, history tells us that the Cajuns (or Acadians, when they first arrived in Louisiana — more on that later) ate simple food that used minimal ingredients. Today, Cajuns still prefer to use simple ingredients and a limited number of spices, allowing the proteins in their dishes to flavor the entrees. It's within Creole dishes that you'll find longer, more sophisticated lists of ingredients, with a stronger focus on herbs.

Toups suggests rather than focusing on what's "proper," look at the ingredients you have on hand and be open-minded. "Feel free to throw in some ingredients

from your own background,” he says. “Cajun food is very forgiving. If you don’t have bell peppers, use poblanos; if you don’t have onions, use leeks. Experiment and go bold with your flavors, and you’ll be all right.”

Today, **Chef John Folse**, CEC, AAC, chef and author of “The Encyclopedia of Cajun & Creole Cuisine,” believes Cajun food may be more sought-after than Creole because of the amount of publicity surrounding it. And, while many may believe you can separate Cajun and Creole by looking to see if there are tomatoes in the dish, Chef Folse says that’s largely a myth. “Instead, look at opulence versus simplicity,” he says. “Creole tends to be a classier cuisine, using more tomato cookery and more of the world’s spices to enhance the final dish, while Cajun cuisine is simpler.”

The Beginning

In the late 1700s, French settlers (known as Acadians) arrived in Louisiana after being exiled from Nova Scotia by the British, settling in the swamplands of Louisiana. The Acadian culture gradually transitioned into the Cajun culture after the French-Canadian settlers were introduced to a plethora of new ingredients from not only Louisiana, but also the Gulf of Mexico and the Mississippi River. “The cuisine of the Acadians, which was traditionally very simple and seafood-based, grew in flavor tremendously when they started to co-mingle with others who had settled in the area,” Chef Folse says. “The swamp floor was the Acadians’ pantry; they cooked one-pot, family-style, stick-to-your-ribs stews with wild game and rice.” Instead of being spicy, Chef Folse says, the cuisine in those early days was flavored naturally with smoke and common herbs, such as bay leaves.

Blending Cultures

Most people living in New Orleans in the 1700s were referred to as “Creole,” a term that encompassed anyone from the descendants of the French colonists who founded the city in 1718 to the children of the first Africans in Louisiana. Because Creoles were a blend of so many backgrounds — including French, Spanish, Italian, African and Native American — each



Opposite: Coconut panna cotta with hibiscus eau de vie, ginger meringue and beetroot cake by Chef Danielle Leoni; Above: Jerk shrimp with Southern-style johnnycakes in mango habanero sauce.

culture introduced exciting new spices to the area that soon became available in the local markets. Chef Folse says that when the various Creoles combined their collective knowledge of cooking and spices, they ended up with much more sophisticated recipes; dishes such as Oysters Rockefeller, Creole chicken fricassee and shrimp Creole all come to mind. “Once Cajuns got into the city, we started to see more spices show up in Cajun pots,” he says, noting that Creoles primarily lived in the city and Cajuns in the outskirts, but “both influenced the cuisine of our city tremendously.”

Starting in the 1980s, Cajun and Creole cuisine both arrived in the culinary spotlight when chefs such as **Paul Prudhomme**, **Emeril Lagasse** and **Susan Spicer** entered the picture. Dozens of world-renowned chefs now call New Orleans home, and the city remains a bucket-list culinary destination for thousands of hungry travelers looking to experience a taste of these famous cuisines.

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