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*makers*

Tyler Fenton is one of Tucson's hottest chefs right now and for good reason. Keep reading to hear his story or click the "What's New" link below for the latest and greatest media updates from Tucson.

[What's New](#)



## Meet Tyler Fenton

At 33, Tyler Fenton is one of the brightest flames in Tucson's culinary scene.

Fenton is the Executive Chef and Owner of the 1.5-year-old **BATA**, a *Bon Appetit* "Best New Restaurant - 2022," and **Reilly Craft Pizza and Drink**, which he opened in 2012 at 22.

The two restaurants stand in juxtaposition with one another. While Reilly remains a go-to for scratch Italian/American cuisine in Tucson, it's BATA's ever-changing global menu showcasing local ingredients that demonstrates Fenton's ingenuity and flourishment as a chef.

"I think for me the main goal with BATA was to celebrate the Tucson region," Fenton said. "We implemented some structural things to support that goal, so we source the ingredients and the entirety of the produce for the restaurant from local farms."

The menu boasts heritage ingredients that have grown in the region for hundreds of years, like tepary beans and White Sonoran Wheat, coupled with produce and meat from some of Southern Arizona's farms, such as **SouthWinds Farms**, **Top Knot Farms**, and **BKW Farms**.

The only additional requirement Fenton has is that each dish on his menu (including the decadent desserts made by talented Pastry Chef Savannah Sandate) must be touched by fire. In fact, the restaurant's name hails from a Japanese style grilling technique called Robata, though Fenton's quick to remind me that BATA is not a Japanese restaurant.

"I wanted to do something that didn't have any cuisine ties and is a modern restaurant where you kind of meander wherever the ingredients take you," Fenton said. "BATA's menu is entirely reflective of whatever has been made available to us at any given time."

BATA's ever-changing menu has necessitated what Fenton refers to as a "Projects Department," comprised of three individuals who are responsible for determining how to use ingredients on hand. In many cases, preservation and fermentation are utilized to extend the shelf life of produce. All fermentation is done in-house, a labor of love that Fenton facetiously refers to as a "fun journey with the health department," and a major differentiating factor for the restaurant.

"By bringing fermentation in house, we can say to our farmers, 'when the frost hits, we'll buy all the green tomatoes that are still left on the vines,'" Fenton said. "We then decide if we're going to ferment them, dry them, or smoke them, or if we're going to do something like make a miso out of them."



Fenton's eye for detail extends beyond just the preservation of ingredients, however. Animals are butchered in-house, and grains are milled in-house, a subtle but crucial detail when it comes to the flavor profile of a dish, Fenton says.

Despite the extensive thought Fenton and his team put into BATA's menu, he's the first to admit that sometimes things go array, and being flexible has been key to the restaurant's success.

"We were supposed to have duck on the menu when we first opened and the day before they were supposed to be delivered to us, the owner sent me a picture of the coyotes that had come through and killed the ducks. So, we pivoted," Fenton said. "We've had times where there's heavy rain and it changes the quality of the produce, and the farmer wants to hold off on distribution. We pivot every single day. It keeps the team on its toes."

During our chat, Fenton divulges that the launch of BATA was nearly a decade in the making, dating back to a 2014 feasibility study of the 6,000-square-foot

space in which the restaurant currently resides.

As I see it, however, BATA's roots date back even further, to when Fenton was a child cooking alongside family members in his Tucson home. When he was eight, the precocious Fenton recalls scouring the aisles of the local grocery store for bouillabaisse ingredients so he could vie off against another family member in an annual Christmas Eve battle of the seafood soups.

From then on, the entirely self-taught Fenton has continued to hone his craft, working in lauded Tucson kitchens like Daniel Scordato's Vivace, taste testing while traveling globally, and developing a collection of more than 1,000 cookbooks that he says he's read cover-to-cover.

Today, Fenton's enthusiasm for pushing the envelope is taking hold among his staff members, many of whom he's had the honor of mentoring from their fledgling days in the kitchen.

"One of the dishes that is really exciting on our menu right now is one made with Japanese eggplants," Fenton said. "What was fun about this dish is that it embodies the ethos of the restaurant really well because it was a collaboration between one of our cooks and our sous chef and I had to give almost no editorial notes. As a chef, it brings you great joy when your team really understands what we're going for as a collective."





Vegetables are the unlikely heroes of BATA's menu, a fact that's evident when I ask Fenton what ingredient he's most excited about as winter approaches.

"Root vegetables," he tells me without a moment of hesitation. "Actually, right now we have a dish that features turnips braised in a stock made from smoked pork bones. Turnips are just one component of the dish, but I joke with my staff that they're really the secret star on the menu."

The other stars in his kitchen are his staff members, he says. The tight-knit group operates much like a family, dining together before the restaurant opens each night, working a maximum of four days per week, and splitting the tips

between front-of-the-house and back-of-the-house.

“The restaurant is an entirely open kitchen, and we have seats at the entryway to the kitchen. The guests who dine there ... comment BATA has the quietest, most calm kitchen they’ve ever seen,” Fenton said. “We make it a point to never yell, and to be organized and respectful. We have a very low tolerance for anything that goes against that.”

When I ask Fenton what he’s most excited about moving forward, he says doubling down on efforts to infuse the restaurant with new ideas, such as creating a more sustainable workplace by eliminating the use of plastics and creating a closed compost loop with some of the restaurant’s partner farms.

This December, he’s looking forward to creating “version 2.0” of some of the dishes guests enjoyed last winter.

“I am Tucson born and raised, so to have the opportunity to really celebrate what we have, it feels important to me,” Fenton said. “I think a lot of people don’t really know what Tucson has to offer. I intend to spotlight it.”



**Fenton's Top Three Favorites on the Menu Right Now:**

***1. Charred Orangetti Spaghetti Squash, Melon Boshi Koji Sauce, Spiced Pecans, Allium***

**How it's prepared:** "Orangetti is a really nice and interesting variety of spaghetti squash we get directly from SouthWinds Farm. The squash gets steamed, roasted, and cubed, then dressed with olive oil and various house powders. It gets grilled in a basket directly on the fire to get a nice smokey char. The sauce utilizes melons from summer that were packed in salt and sugar, then smoked and dehydrated, then repacked in its brine. Pickled white onion adds a punch of acidity, and spiced candied pecans round out the dish both in flavor and texture."

***2. Grilled 14-Day Dry Aged Top Knot Farms Duck Breast, Carrot Mirin, Beet Sauce***



**How it's prepared:** "We get beautiful ducks from Top Knot Farms. We age them a minimum of 14 days, then they get lightly smoked, taken off the bone, and grilled to render the skin. Carrot mirin and a sauce made from beets round out the set, but anytime we have duck breast on the menu the star is the duck, so we like to keep the rest of the set very simple."

### ***3. Smoked Pumpkin Cake, Burnt White Chocolate, Whey Anglaise***

**How it's prepared:** "Our pastry chef makes a beautiful cake with smoked pumpkins, a rich and complex mousse from caramelized white chocolate, and an anglaise utilizing whey (a byproduct of our yogurt production) for acidity."

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