



# SAVEUR

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**GREECE** • *Rhode Island Pizza* • **MAUI**  
*DIY Dijon* • **INDIANAPOLIS** • *Birria Tatemada*  
**SOUTH KOREA** • *Cactus Fruit Granita* • **CALIFORNIA COAST**  
*Má Là Pig Ears* • **CROATIA** • *Puerto Rican Cacao*





By HANNAH WALHOUT

*In the American Southwest, learning to cook from the arid region's*

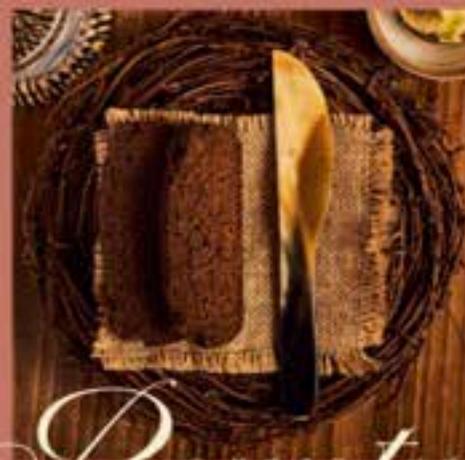
# DESERT'S



Photography BY MATT FURMAN

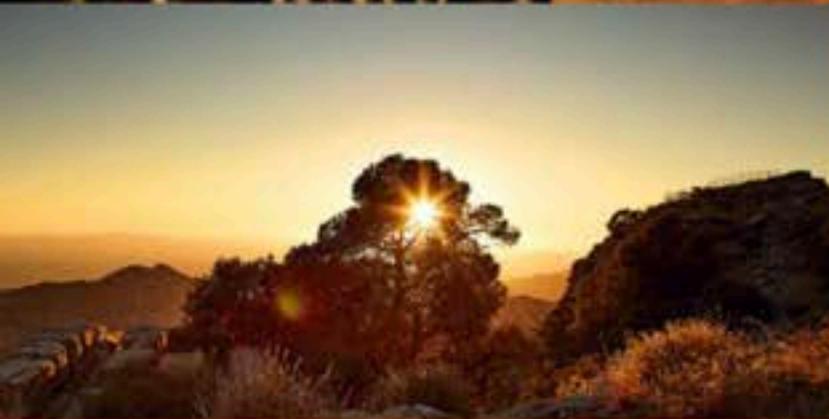
*surprising abundance may be the strongest path to sustainability.*

e.131



*Bounty*





# Ambling THROUGH

THE DESERT BRUSH, HIGH IN THE IN-KO-PAH Mountains of southeastern California, chef Aaron Lopez stops every so often to point out something edible. Here, brittlebush, with sage-colored leaves that smell like rosemary when crushed between your fingers; there, yucca, which, in the summer, sends out bell-shaped blossoms that you can stuff and fry, like a starchier *fior di zucca*. The branching cholla cactus produces flower buds that taste somewhere between artichokes and asparagus. "They're like our truffle," Lopez tells me.

I was tagging along on a morning trip to one of the chef's go-to foraging spots, a 40-minute drive west of Ursa, his restaurant in El Centro. The In-Ko-Pah range and the Jacumba Mountains directly to the east appear, at times, like giant boulders sliding into the valley below. In the late 19th century, a large development company attempted to turn the dry basin at the foot of the mountains into farmland, diverting the Colorado River for irrigation and charging growers for the water. Once the bed of an ancient lake, the land had promising soil. But in 1905, a canal burst, submerging half of the Torres-Martinez Reservation and the agricultural town of Salton, forming what we now call the Salton Sea. The region eventually became a somewhat improbable agricultural center, and the crops grown there are still sustained by the (increasingly drought-prone) Colorado.

Today, the arid, below-sea-level expanse known as the Imperial Valley occasionally yields to shockingly green stretches of water-intensive monocultures, the most abundant being alfalfa for feeding livestock. Driving through on my way to meet Lopez, signs slip by bearing place names like Smuggler's Gulch, Coyote Wells, and Ocotillo. I also see signs for Border Patrol. Rounding a bend in the highway, I squint for a second, trying to understand the hard dark line cutting across the landscape—the 30-foot-tall fence another example of humans trying to bend the desert to our will.

Lopez grew up in El Centro, the largest town in Imperial

Across the American Southwest, the diversity of ingredients flourishing across the region's varied landscapes provides inspiration for chefs like Bata's Tyler Fenton (facing page, top left).





County, and his wife, June Chee, in nearby Yuma, Arizona. After spending much of their adult lives away—including stints in Los Angeles, where Lopez cooked in restaurants, and Honolulu, where the couple met—they were inspired to return to this part of the country during a Southwestern road trip. “That was a quick reminder like, ‘Wait a minute, I’m from the desert,’ you know?” Lopez explains. “Along the trip, we made a business plan, a pitch deck, and gave it a name.” Eventually, they encountered an opportunity to take over a restaurant space in Lopez’s hometown and opened Ursa in 2024.

The night before our foraging expedition, I sampled meaty mushrooms atop mounds of green, toothsome lamb’s-quarter buds, and a stewy venison short rib tucked under shards of tart, dehydrated cactus. After a glass of wine—Ursa’s international wine list includes options from California and Mexico—I started to anticipate the winding mountain drive home and switched to a honey-sweet cola made with the aromatic bark, beans, sap, and flowers of the mesquite tree.

“We want to tell the story of the four deserts that make up the Southwest,”

Lopez explains. These include the Sonoran, which spreads from the Mexican states of Baja California and Sonora up into Arizona and California, where Lopez and I were now gathering wild buckwheat. There’s also the Mojave, to our north; the Chihuahuan, extending all the way to West Texas; and the Great Basin Desert, which covers Nevada and half of Utah. To tell this culinary story, the Ursa team has learned from local Indigenous communities and worked with foragers and producers both nearby and further afield, including Arizona’s Akimel O’odham-owned Ramona Farms and Broken Arrow Ranch in Texas, which provides native meats like antelope. “Almost once a week [we meet] somebody doing something similar to us,” Lopez says. “There are people who really want to show the desert to the world.”



**A RESTAURANT CENTERING DESERT** ingredients is still somewhat of a novelty, especially in this part of Southern California, where the economy remains intertwined with conventional agriculture. But Lopez and Chee are members of a growing Southwestern cohort turning the locavore lens to some of the country’s driest, hottest, most seemingly barren places—a culinary philosophy rooted in traditions that have been practiced, by necessity, as long as people have lived here.

“I was taught by our elders to observe our desert environment throughout the year, every year, because each season the native plants produce food that is good for us,” explains Maegan Lopez (no relation), a horticulturist at Mission Garden in Tucson, Arizona. In addition to an

early education in wild plants from Tohono O’odham teachers, Maegan, who is the cultural outreach liaison for the Garden, learned about desert plants from her grandfather, who cultivated many in his yard. “My first visit to the Garden was like being with my grandpa all over again,” she says.

The garden site at the base of Tucson’s Sentinel Peak has been cultivated more or less continuously for 4,000-odd years. Now, it hosts historically accurate plots from different eras of Sonoran history—from early instances of Three Sisters agriculture (in which beans, corn, and squash grow symbiotically alongside one another) to heirloom varieties of non-native plants bred and safeguarded by Indigenous farmers. The garden collaborates with tribal historians and donates harvests to Pascua Yaqui (Yoeme) and Tohono O’odham elders in the community. Maegan loves distributing staple produce like Hui squash, which often prompts people to share childhood memories of this long-necked, orange-fleshed ingredient. “We grow with the intention of encouraging tribal members to reinvigorate their love of traditional crops and foodways,” Maegan says. She hopes this work will help residents better understand Tucson’s history: “What it was, how it came to be, and what it could be in the future.”

Named a UNESCO City of Gastronomy in 2015, Tucson might just be Arizona’s desert food capital, where certain native ingredients, like mesquite and chiltepin, a fiery pea-size chile, have become part of local diners’ culinary vocabulary. Abutted on two sides by Saguaro National Park, the city has some of the world’s most biodiverse desert within easy reach. The nearby Santa Catalina Mountains are peppered with mesquite, hackberry, piñon pine, and Arizona black walnut trees, as well as sotol and agave plants. There are saguaros, of course, and chollas, nopales, and barrel cactuses, too—each one’s edible fruit different from the last.

At Bata, a sleek, fire-focused restaurant in downtown

Below: Various parts of the mesquite tree lend their striking aroma to Ursa’s house-made cola. Facing page, from top left: The Santa Catalina Mountains outside Tucson; Ursa founders June Chee and Aaron Lopez.



## STOCKING THE DESERT LARDER

### El Potrero Trading Post

For sundried red chile (and other ingredients, like New Mexico piñon nuts), Johnny Ortiz-Coricha recommends this family-run shop based in Chimayo, north of Santa Fe.

### Ramona Farms

Aaron Lopez and Tyler Fenton are both customers of this Akimel O’odham-owned operation, which grows heirloom wheat, corn, and beans on the Gila River Reservation, south of Phoenix.

### Native Seeds/SEARCH

This nonprofit’s online shop has a “Sonoran Pantry” section with Anasazi beans, mesquite honey, and more—plus handmade goods like Navajo rugs and Tohono O’odham baskets.

### Desert Forager

Prickly pear is the star of this line of wild-harvested products, which includes dehydrated, powdered fruit; flavored shrubs and syrups; and even a high-fiber flour made from the seeds.

### Broken Arrow Ranch

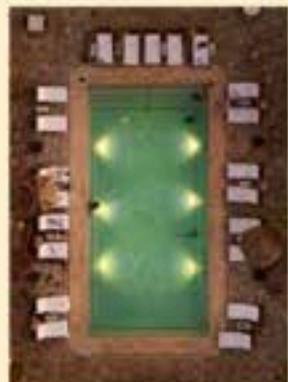
There’s no beef on the menu at Ursa; instead, you’ll find game meats like venison, quail, and wild boar—much of it field-harvested in Texas by this family-run business.





## SOAK UP THE SCENERY

ONE OF THE ONLY boutique accommodations within 50 miles of El Centro is the Jacumba Hot Springs Hotel: a 20-room inn that lures bathers with its warm mineral waters and Southwestern Moorish style. The original resort was built a century ago and boomed in the 1930s thanks to the so-called Impossible Railroad—a line from San Diego named for the almost foolhardy logistics required to cross the stretch of mountains and desert. Plagued by mudslides and floods, passenger service ended in the early 1950s, and the tiny settlement of Jacumba Hot Springs became somewhat of a ghost town—its status as a spa destination long forgotten, until now.



Tucson, chef Tyler Fenton uses these desert ingredients to honor the place he grew up. “Bata was designed to celebrate our region,” Fenton says. The restaurant’s larder stocks heritage ingredients like tepary beans, local grains, and the kernels, husks, and silks of Pima corn; most of Bata’s produce comes from Tucson or within about a 100-mile radius. “We try to be very respectful of Indigenous food cultures,” Fenton tells me, and he’s careful to only use foraged ingredients that are plentiful enough to go around: “Prickly pear, mesquite, cholla buds, chiltepin—those are wild foods that are abundant.”



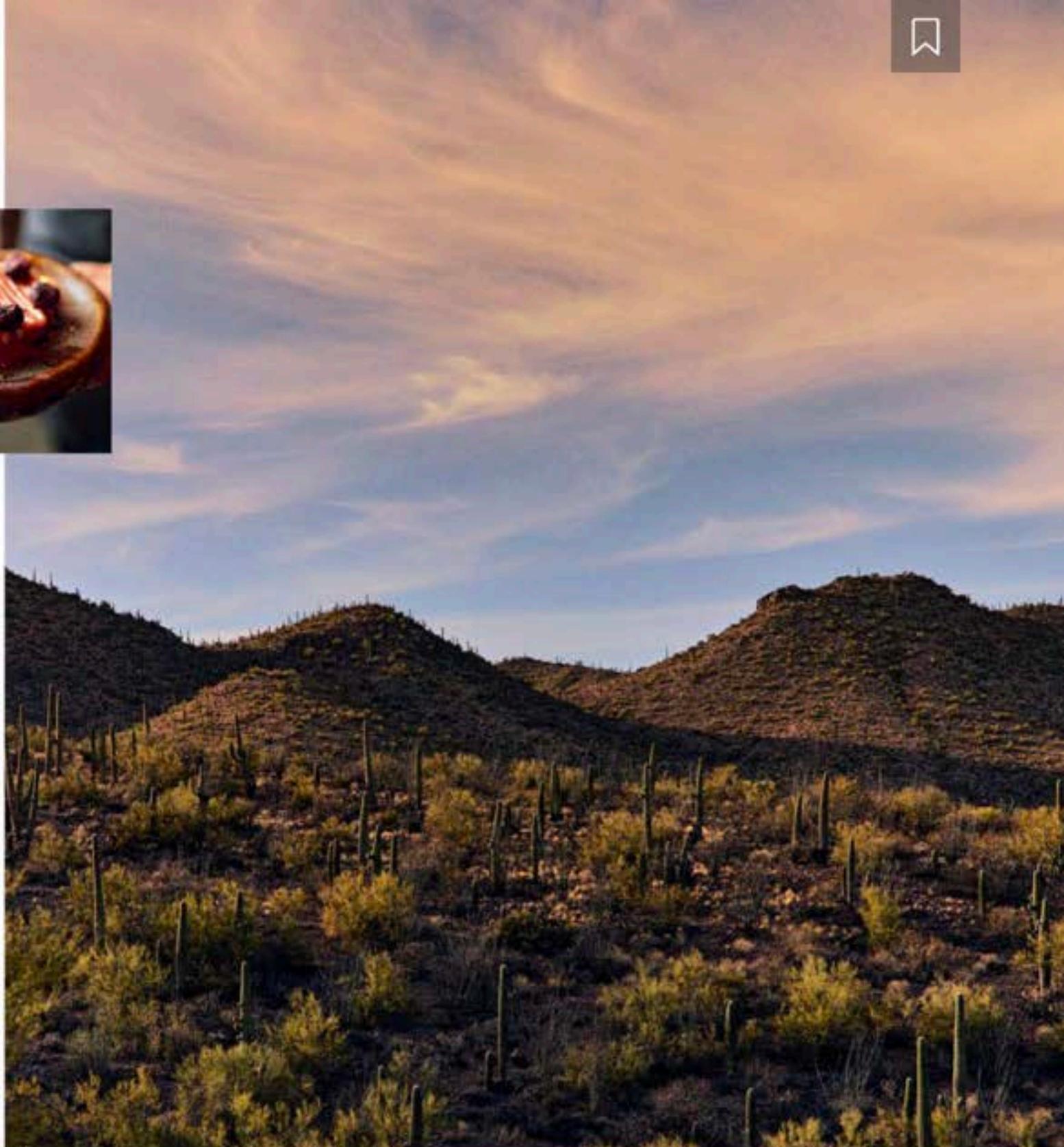
On Fenton’s menu, you’ll find cocktails finished with a tincture of creosote, a desert bush prized for its scent and medicinal properties; malawach, a Yemenite-style flatbread, made with heritage White Sonora wheat; and smoked ham served over tepary beans. Grilled mushrooms come with kosho made from spruce tips foraged from nearby Mount Lemmon. Barbata, the moody bar beneath Bata, mixes cocktails using Suncliff Gin, distilled locally with Sonoran botanicals, and Whiskey Del Bac, a mesquite-laced Arizona whiskey.

Fenton admits he didn’t always understand how special the landscape around him was, but he ultimately came to love it. “The desert is challenging, right?” he says. “The things that grow well here have developed really impactful flavor, in the way that grapes that have to struggle make the best wine.”

DESERTS ARE DEFINED BY DRYNESS, WITH LITTLE rainfall, limited plant life, and often (but not always) high temperatures—extreme conditions that are becoming increasingly familiar as the climate crisis continues. Our resource-intensive food systems, which are partly to blame, are becoming even more unpredictable. Understanding the desert may provide some insights into a more sustainable path forward.

Johnny Ortiz-Concha and Maida Branch live on a sprawling 22-acre ranch in northern New Mexico, where they raise Criollo cattle and Navajo-Churro sheep. Branch, originally from Santa Fe, is the founder of an Indigenous artists’ collective; Ortiz-Concha, who grew up in Taos Pueblo, is an artist and chef. Together, they run / Shed, a multifaceted enterprise one might describe (perhaps inadequately) as a dinner series. On a / Shed menu, each dish contains at least one foraged component, usually at its center, and often from the founders’ land.

“The pueblo where I’m from is over 1,000 years old and [one of] the only continuously inhabited native villages in the country,” Ortiz-Concha tells me. Still, engaging with Indigenous foods there “doesn’t really happen in daily life.” After leaving





Facing page:  
Smoked ham with  
grilled mushrooms  
at Bata. Previous  
page, from left:  
Saguaro sorbet;  
Starr Pass, Tucson.

to cook in Michelin-starred restaurants, including Alinea and Saison, the culinary possibilities drew him back home. "There are not many people utilizing the bounties of this place," he says. "So I tried to put myself in the shoes of my ancestors."

Branch and Ortiz-Concha aim to manipulate their land, and what's growing on it, as little as possible. "The longer you are intimate with something, the more you understand its cycles and nuances," Ortiz-Concha explains. This desert has some of the largest diversity of wild edible plants in the country; the couple's property contains a riparian zone, a lush riverside oasis abutting the Rio Vallecitos that Ortiz-Concha tells me "has a little bit of everything that I love about New Mexico: piñon, sagebrush, and wild apricots, plums, and chokecherries."

As with anywhere, there are times of both abundance and scarcity in the high desert. Some plants, like those apricots, have long life cycles; trees that are barren one year may provide a bounty in three. Those cycles are changing with the climate, too. The trick, Ortiz-Concha suggests, is observing and responding to the place rather than trying to tame it.



**BACK ON A MOUNTAIN SLOPE OVERLOOKING THE IMPERIAL Valley,** Aaron Lopez shares that his guests seem open to Urso's version of change, if somewhat cautiously. "We're a blue-collar community and we do things a certain way," he says. "So it takes some time to catch on." He's also adjusting to being back in the desert, a personal change he hadn't expected. "I had no interest in coming back here for a very long time," he tells me. "To see this place with new eyes is enriching. I can look at this town and see between the lines now."

Eventually, we spot a small spray of Pima Club wheat, an heirloom Akimel O'odham variety, at the base of a massive boulder. It's known for being drought- and disease-resistant, adapted specifically for the Sonoran environment. At Urso, the grain takes the form of a roti accompanying wild boar machaca, a dried and rehydrated meat dish.

As agriculture became industrialized and Native foodways eroded, Pima Club wheat once faced extinction. Thanks to the concerted efforts of a few seed savers, farmers, and advocates, it's now back in home pantries and restaurants around the region and beyond. This kind of thinking—a reframing of our relationship to the land rooted in Indigenous knowledge and environmental history—may prove crucial in the years to come, as climate change wreaks havoc on our food systems. The desert might just show us the future. ♦



## CACTUS FRUIT

### GRANITA

Serves: 2-4



**OPUNTIA CACTUS FRUITS,** also known as prickly pears, are one of those things best enjoyed in their purest form, according to Johnny Ortiz-Concha of / Shed in Taos, New Mexico. Ortiz-Concha takes advantage of the abundant native fruits simply by juicing them, then using the bright pink liquid as a mixer with mezcal or frozen in the form of an icy granita. To prepare the juice, add **1 1/4 lb. prickly pears (about 8)** to a large pot and fill with cold water. Drain the water, pouring off any dirt or debris, then fill the pot again just to cover. Bring to a gentle simmer and turn off the heat. Set aside to cool for about 10 minutes, then drain the fruit through a fine-mesh strainer. Place the strainer over a medium bowl and use a wooden spoon to smash and pierce the fruit, letting the juice drain into the bowl. Discard any thick skins from the strainer, then transfer the remaining pulp to a double layer of cheesecloth and squeeze to extract any remaining juice into the bowl. You should have about 1 1/2 cups. To make a granita, transfer the juice to a 6-inch square glass container or baking dish and freeze until solid, about 3 hours. Once frozen, use a fork to scrape into fluffy crystals and serve.

