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Monthly
Meet Our Makers Newsletter



Meet Aaron and June Lopez

Long before Ursa opened its doors in Tucson in October 2025, Aaron and June Lopez began reimagining how the Sonoran Desert could be experienced at the table. Shaped by border-town upbringings and years spent honing their craft in some of the country's most demanding kitchens, the husband-and-wife team returned to the Sonoran Desert to honor the landscape not as backdrop, but as muse. Today, at Ursa in Tucson, that vision unfolds through an immersive tasting menu rooted in native ingredients and a deep respect for place. Keep reading to learn how Aaron and June are inviting diners to see, and taste, the Sonoran Desert in an entirely new way, or click below for the latest media updates from Visit Tucson.

[What's New](#)

Our story begins here in the desert.
A vast landscape of resilience and timeless beauty, where life thrives in unexpected ways. Our inspiration comes from this land and is woven into every detail of this place.

Ursa is a love letter to our home. It is a celebration of the desert's bounty, its wild flavors, and its untold stories.

Tonight, we invite you to journey with us through a rich landscape that is both ancient and alive.

Welcome to Ursa.

Ursa opened in Tucson in October 2025, a living homage to the city's most veritable asset – the Sonoran Desert. Each guest is welcomed with a love letter to the desert, printed on paper made from cactus fibers, a quiet introduction to the philosophy that shapes every detail of the meal. Before a single bite is served, the desert has already taken hold. Asymmetrical, matte-glazed vessels shaped by Arizona ceramicists mimic weathered stone, while spoons carved from fallen branches and steak knives with cholla handles make the desert's textures tangible.

Desert imposters are noticeably absent; there are no lemons or limes behind the bar, no familiar citrus to round the edges. Instead, there is smoke, bitterness, wild sweetness and the plants and animals that have survived in the Sonoran Desert for centuries.

"I feel like Ursa is sort of this bridge between diners and nature," said Aaron Lopez, the restaurant's chef and co-owner. "Sometimes you have to look a guest in the eye and say, that's what that plant does. And who are we to add salt to it or sugar to it?"

At Ursa, the ever-changing eight-course tasting menu unfolds like a guided walk through the Sonoran Desert. Guests choose between a regular or vegan menu, then place their trust in the kitchen for a thoughtfully curated experience. No matter their choice, the dining experience is plant-forward, shaped by ingredients like amaranth greens and flowers, lambsquarter, ancient squash, cowpeas, mesquite, palo verde, and fermented berries. When animal protein appears, it is local game: quail, venison, elk, or antelope.

"It's taking what something does and we just amp it up," he said. "We put it on a pedestal."

Even dessert challenges expectation: for instance, a small rectangle of lightly steamed native squash, served without salt or sugar, asks diners to encounter it without embellishment.

"We just sort of invite the guests to taste the squash in its purest form," he said. "The choice is yours."



For Aaron and his wife and business partner, June, that philosophy is inseparable from where they grew up. June was raised in Yuma, Ariz. on the border of Arizona, California and Mexico, while Aaron was raised in Calexico, Calif., another small border town in the Sonoran Desert. Culture moved fluidly across the border, as did music, language and ideas. The landscape, shaped by summers where temperatures soared as high as 127 degrees, was stark, but their communities were vibrant.

"I grew up in this really vibrant punk and art community where there was just this sense of community and... we cherished free thinkers," he said. "I was nurtured by that, while also growing up in this... town of resilience."

That combination of creativity and resilience shaped the way Aaron saw the world. At 18, he left for Los Angeles without a clear roadmap. He played music, opened an art gallery in Echo Park and sculpted, drawn to the physicality of materials. He was drawn to how something could be carved, manipulated and understood from the inside out.

“In hindsight, looking back at why I cook for a living, I think it has to do with sculpting – the manipulation of the product. It was less about nurturing people and making people happy, and more about how you find these products and... understanding the anatomy of them,” he said.

Restaurants entered his life almost by accident. To make ends meet, he started as a bar back and became captivated by the choreography of service: the urgency and rhythm of a busy kitchen.

“They spoke a language that I had never understood, I had never heard,” he said. “And I felt like these were my people.”

Curiosity turned into obsession. He worked his way through increasingly demanding kitchens, attended culinary school at Le Cordon Bleu and committed himself fully. In his nearly 15 years in the industry, Aaron has worked alongside celebrated chefs like Michael Voltaggio, Josef Centeno and Neal Fraser.

“I just threw myself into this industry,” he said. “I just stopped going out with friends, I stopped going to family events and I just obsessed.”

In 2016, that commitment took him to Hawaii, where he met June. After multiple encounters at the restaurant where he worked in Honolulu, he finally asked her to coffee. As they talked, a shared origin story surfaced. Both were shaped by the Sonoran Desert and yearned to get back to it.

“I missed the tans and the browns and the golds,” he said. “There was something calling.”

Aaron and June began taking long road trips through Arizona and New Mexico. They bought a foraging guide and a small camera, cataloguing native plants, pressing them to boards and studying their textures and hues. Slowly, what began as exploration evolved into a mission.

“No one was representing the desert in the culinary world,” he said.



In July 2024, they answered that gap, opening the original Ursa in El Centro, Calif. as a laboratory of sorts. There, they built their own vinegars and acids from native ingredients, leaned into fermentation and explored pre-colonial crops and game meats that reflected the terrain rather than overwrote it. But as much as the experiment taught them, they quickly realized El Centro could not sustain their long-term vision. The \$150-per-person tasting menu was too ambitious for the market, and a move became inevitable.

“It was developing a database for what we’re doing today,” he said. “Through fermentation and preparation, we can achieve layers of flavors that we couldn’t develop in the past.”

As their work gained attention, so did their connection to Tucson. Among those who took notice was James Beard Award-winning chef Janos Wilder, a foundational figure in Southwestern cuisine, and the President of the Board of Directors of Tucson City of Gastronomy, a non-profit organization that promotes the city’s UNESCO City of Gastronomy designation. The organization works to strengthen the local food economy, preserve culinary heritage, and celebrate the region’s culinary assets – an ethos that resonated deeply with Aaron and June.

“I truly feel a responsibility to sort of carry the torch where he (Janos) started,” Aaron said of Ursa’s move to Tucson.

Demonstrating the bounty of the desert’s harsh landscape, Ursa’s menu relies on drought- and heat-tolerant crops. In addition to ethically foraging themselves, Aaron and June partner with Native Seeds/SEARCH, a nonprofit dedicated to conserving and promoting heirloom crops native to the Southwest and Mexico, and Ramona Farms, an

Akimel O'odham-owned operation preserving traditional desert crops. They also collaborate with Broken Arrow Ranch, Mission Gardens, and other sustainable local growers.

For Aaron, every dish reflects both the desert and his personal connection to it. The evolving menu honors his family members, including his grandfather, who as a boy, harvested barrel cactus fruit that his mother candied into treats.

“That was actually our opening dish,” Aaron said. “And it’s 100% in honor of my grandfather.”

Today, Aaron and June invite guests into their world, sharing their passion for and devotion to the Sonoran Desert.

“Our goal has always been simple,” he said. “It’s to show people what the desert can do.”



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