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# tucson **MEET OUR** *makers*

In 2025, Tucson is celebrating its 250th anniversary. It's a history that has been influenced by many cultures, including the Tohono O'odham, Spanish and Mexicans. In this month's edition of Meet Our Makers, you'll hear from James Beard Award winning baker, Don Guerra, on how he's keeping the more than 300-year-old culinary traditions of Tucson alive through the implementation of his grain chain. Keep reading to learn about Don or click on the What's New link below for the latest and greatest media updates from Tucson.

[What's New in Tucson](#)



**Meet Baker Don Guerra**

Don Guerra of Barrio Bread recalls the day he accepted the James Beard Award for Outstanding Baker in Chicago in June 2022. The moment, he says, was “surreal.”

Yet, two years later, the man who is recognized as the unofficial godfather of the Southern Arizona “grain chain,” revitalizing the usage of heritage grains that date back to the 1690s when Spanish Missionaries brought wheat to Southern Arizona, is unfazed by his ever-burgeoning popularity.

“I’m really trying to work on resilient food systems by showing what you can do when you have a vision and share it with all those you around you and open up this possibility of working together,” Don said. “I’ve done this around the bread by being a sort-of champion of the seed, getting out there and ... working to form a sustainable food system around the grain and bread.”

In other words, despite the accolades, he’s still the same old Don – humble, kind, curious, exceptionally hardworking, and at 54, exuding a wisdom that seems to be evermore rooted in him. He compares his life to the necklace that dangles on his neck. Since 18, he’s worn the Tohono O’odham “Man in the Maze” symbol as a reminder of life’s evolution.

“It’s not a circle, it’s really spiraling up,” Don said. “I get up every day and I ask myself ... what do I know and what can I learn? I’m always growing.”

These days, Don’s focused on developing his interpersonal relationships, including being a father to his three children, who range in age from 22 months to 21 years old, and championing teaching breadmaking in the community to keep the centuries old tradition alive. The one-time teacher, now baker estimates he’s taught some 4,000 people how to make bread with heritage grains, some of whom have gone on to form their own cottage bakeries.

“To me, there’s so much opportunity in this area, and I think that’s what we have to see as Tucsonans,” Don said. “You know, there’s plenty of room if we really want this for the total community. We have to think less about ourselves, less about daily economics, and open it up to all people. We’ll get way more out of it.”



Though opportunity has come knocking on several occasions over the past two years, Don's simply doubled down on his priorities, while inching forward in introducing new business concepts, like a forthcoming bagel restaurant that's expected to debut at greater Phoenix's Agritopia later this year and at the much-anticipated Tucson Gastronomy Collective thereafter.

The bagel concept results from a 2023 partnership with Phoenix-based Chompie's Head of Bread and Bakery Programs, Neil Borenstein. Deemed the "Sonoran Bagel," the collaboration boasts four different flavors (plain, sesame, everything and focaccia) and is made from the flour Don catapulted to fame – Hayden Flour Mills Sonoran White wheat. Don uses a sourdough starter, which allows the bagels to be airier, though the outside remains crunchy, akin to a baguette.

This past summer, Don also worked with his son Mateo to fine-tune their pizza making skills. They've held several popular focaccia pizza pop-ups and Mateo devised a business plan for a yet-to-debut pizza concept.

"To see my 19-year-old son coming into this as a pizza maker and a pizza consultant, and to have these younger people coming to me in their early 20s, I realize this is what it's going to take to create that legacy of grain growing and breadmaking in this region," Don said.

Guerra is a longtime baker, having owned two successful bakeries in the '90s before shifting his focus to teaching in an elementary school for seven years. However, in 2009, Guerra found himself longing to return to baking, so he established the forward-thinking Barrio Bread out of his garage shortly after the '08 economic crash. It flourished because of Guerra's steadfast commitment to using superlative ingredients and his magnanimous spirit of feeding his neighbors his earliest loaves. In fact, his

bakery's name stems from Guerra's strong sense of community – barrio means neighborhood in Spanish.

Though tasty, his initial loaves would have been unrecognizable from those he's producing today. Initially he worked with commodity flours, but after several instances when flour was delivered late, he realized he needed to determine a more sustainable solution. The solution serendipitously presented itself.

"I used to deliver bread to Native Seed/SEARCH. One day I popped in and they told me 'Hey, we're going to apply for this grant. We really want you to be involved. We need a test baker. We want to plant Sonoran White wheat, but we have to do something more than plant and harvest it. We need to turn it into food. And we need you ... to tell people how you make your bread. Why it's important. Are there flavor benefits? What are the agriculture benefits, biodiversity, all those things?" Guerra said. "I said, 'ok, wow, let's do it.'"



Shortly thereafter, Gary Nabhan, a 2024 James Beard Award winner, stopped by Don's garage with a pillowcase of Sonoran White Wheat seed. That moment recharted the course of Don's life, lending itself to the later partnerships Don formed with BKW Farms and Hayden Flour Mills, and the opening of Barrio Bread's own storefront in 2015, the same year Tucson was recognized as a UNESCO City of Gastronomy.

Today, Don uses a variety of wheats, ranging from Red Fife and Desert Durum to Purple Barley and Einkorn in the production of 30 different types of Barrio Bread. Each morning, before the bakery opens its doors, a line snakes around the building as people eagerly await their fresh-baked loaves.

Thanks to Tucson showing up for Don every day, Don says he's committed a portion of his energy to determine how to show up for all Tucsonans.

"Right now, food equity is on the forefront of my mind. I gave a keynote speech recently at the U of A, and I asked the audience ... to help me reach consumers in these outlying marginalized areas so we can get my products into those people's hands. Now, at Valencia Library, with the help of a grant, they are selling my bread for half off," Don said. "We are serving many of the people that have traditions and roots in this community for longer than any of any of us. We all need to work together, and Tucson is the ideal place for that."



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