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tucson **MEET OUR** *makers*

For nearly four years, Feng-Feng Yeh has been reclaiming an often overlooked piece of Tucson's culinary history through the Chinese Chorizo Festival. What started as a personal journey into the city's forgotten foodways has grown into a celebration of community, culture, and resilience. Read on to learn more about Yeh's work - and don't miss the latest media updates from Tucson via the link below.

[What's New in Tucson](#)



Meet Feng-Feng Yeh

Feng-Feng Yeh describes herself as an artist, activist, community builder, and chef – but it wasn't until returning to her hometown of Tucson during the pandemic that she also embraced the role of historian.

As the founder of the Chinese Chorizo Festival, a celebration of the culinary fusion between Chinese and Mexican communities in early 20th-century Tucson, Yeh is celebrating a chapter of the city's history that was missing from her childhood. Now in its fourth year, the festival's namesake dish is featured at top Tucson restaurants every October and November, with the former officially recognized as Chinese Chorizo Month in Pima County.

Teaming up with local chefs, including former Top Chef contender Maria Mazon of BOCA and food journalist and chef Jackie Tran, Yeh prepares around 700 pounds of Chinese chorizo, distributing it in 30-pound increments to 35 to 40 restaurants each October. In the three years since the festival's inception, she's made around 2,100 pounds.

"Chinese chorizo does not have a specific recipe. Historically the Chinese chorizo was made by Chinese grocers and butchers who made it to cater to their communities, reviving whatever meat that was on hand: end cuts and scraps of meat with Mexican spices and chiles. Chinese chorizo is defined by its maker, and today we celebrate it as a recipe for solidarity, a symbol for resilience," Yeh said.

Tucson, a UNESCO City of Gastronomy, boasts a food history that stretches back more than 4,000 years. However, its more recent culinary chapters have been largely shaped by immigrants.

Chinese chorizo was a staple in the over 100 Chinese-owned grocery stores that flourished in Tucson's barrios – neighborhoods that served as hubs for Mexican and Chinese immigrants – from the 1880s to the 1970s. The dish's origin story is tied to an era marked by harsh racial laws and anti-Chinese sentiment, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. According to Yeh, the recipe itself, born out of necessity, serves as a powerful metaphor: "It mirrors the immigrant experience – scraps and end cuts of meat transformed into something highly desirable with red wine, Mexican spices, and chilies."



More than just places of commerce, Chinese-owned grocery stores – offering customers the option to purchase on credit – served as lifelines for families struggling to make ends meet. One of Tucson’s longest-standing restaurants, El Charro Café, which marked its 100th anniversary in 2022, has recognized how crucial this relationship was for its own survival, even during times of economic hardship.

“El Charro, the longest running restaurant in Tucson relied on Chinese grocery stores during their early days. According to Chef Carlotta Flores, her family would buy groceries for the days work ahead and pay their tab afterwards,” Yeh said.

By the 1970s, the demolition of Barrio Viejo to make way for the Tucson Convention Center erased much of the city’s historic Chinese and Mexican heritage. It wasn’t until Yeh was scrolling through her phone late one night that she rediscovered this forgotten history.

“I was doomscrolling and stumbled on a grant calling for a community driven project from MOCA & the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Arts. Something about the grant was calling me to go for it, however, since I was in NYC for so long, I didn’t have community here. What I did have was my experience growing up here in Tucson and this pushed me to reflect on this time,” Yeh said.

Growing up in Tucson, Yeh often felt like an outsider. The city's cultural landscape was rich with Mexican, Native American, and Anglo influences, but few faces in her community reflected her own.

After high school, Yeh spent two decades living in New York City, where she carved out a career in high-end fashion and later transitioned to work as an executive chef. She never imagined she would return to Tucson. However, when the pandemic struck, she decided to visit her parents – a trip that would unexpectedly spark a profound journey into Tucson’s immigrant history.

As she delved into research, she simultaneously revisited her memories of visiting open-air Chinese markets as a child. At the time, she felt embarrassment and a desire to assimilate into a more "American" identity. But as an adult, the sights, smells, and language she once resisted took on new meaning. They revealed a cultural richness that she now longed to share with others.

Yeh recalls, “I wasn’t taught about the significant contributions of the Chinese immigrants in Tucson. I was not taught about historic legislation like the Chinese Exclusion Act that impacted their experience and in turn my own. I found a real empowerment in this story of community resilience.”

It wasn’t long before Yeh stumbled upon a recipe for Chinese chorizo on the Tucson Chinese Cultural Center’s website. Thanks to a Nightbloom Grant from MOCA Tucson, which supports community-driven art projects, she was able to bring her vision for the festival to life. What began as a small gathering in 2022 has since blossomed into a major event, embraced by chefs, artists, historians, and Tucson families alike.

Now, as the festival enters its fourth year, Yeh eagerly anticipates what lies ahead. While she’s still in the planning stages and can’t yet disclose how many restaurants will participate, she promises this year’s festival will continue to grow and evolve.



For an even deeper look into the contributions of Chinese immigrants in Tucson, visitors can stop by Yeh's Chinese grocery store installation called Vivamos Siempre Como Hermanos, on display through December 2026. Located in the Casa Cordova, one of the oldest buildings in Tucson on the historic block of the Tucson Museum of Art campus, this adobe building once housed Chinese tenants, a forgotten history that was only recently unearthed by Yeh, reporter Reia Li and employees of Tucson Museum of Art. Now, the space has been transformed into a detailed recreation of a Chinese grocery store – complete with goods that tell the story of Tucson's Chinese-owned shops and the families who ran them. Visitors can even find Chinese candy in jars – an ode to the candy that was given out as gifts in Chinese grocery stores in the barrio.

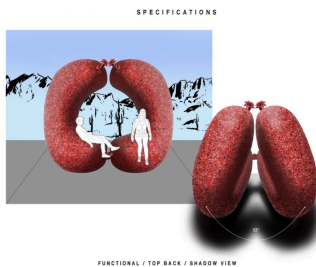
“The whole idea is to capture the intimacy that was built at these stores through storytelling and to reclaim the act of consumption,” Yeh said.

Coming fresh off the heels of a speakeasy film screening with the Loft Cinema, Yeh says additional events will occur throughout the year to coincide with the Vivamos Siempre Como Hermanos installation.

Also in 2025, Yeh is excited that one of her long-headed goals is coming closer to fruition: creating a permanent community artwork that honors the significant role Chinese immigrants played in shaping Tucson. First proposed during the inaugural Chinese Chorizo Festival festival, Yeh envisioned an 11-foot sculpture in the shape of a heart, formed by two links of sausage. This month, in partnership with MoCA Tucson and mosaic artist Carlos Valenzuela, the long-awaited project will begin to take shape.

Every Thursday in May, Valenzuela will lead a mosaic workshop at MoCA Tucson, where participants can either keep their self-crafted tile or donate it for the sculpture. While the sculpture's debut date has not yet been set (Yeh is still seeking donations and negotiating a location), she's thrilled by the progress and that Chinese chorizo has become a powerful symbol of Tucson's community solidarity.

"There's still much work to be done," Yeh reflects. "But I'm excited because we're not just uncovering forgotten histories anymore – we're creating new ones."



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