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tucson **MEET OUR** *makers*

As Earth Month unfolds – a time dedicated to raising awareness and championing environmental protection – we're shining a spotlight on one of Tucson's most renowned bioregional herbalists, foragers, and authors: John Slattery. Read on to discover more about his inspiring work or click the link below to catch the latest updates from the Tucson media scene.

[What's New in Tucson](#)



Meet John Slattery

John Slattery has lived two distinct lives – one anchored in tradition, and the other forged by the healing power of nature.

By 2001, in the wake of 9/11, John found himself at a turning point. Though raised in the Catholic faith, it had never fully resonated with him. Six years earlier, he had left his hometown of Chicago, spending time in New Mexico, Colorado, and New York

City. But it was only after heading further west – and eventually south – that a deeper transformation began. As he journeyed through the vibrant landscapes of Mexico, Central, and South America, he gradually shed the expectations of his past and redefined his place in the world. This was the moment when John redefined his connection to the world – not by man-made constructs, but through the living, breathing essence of nature itself, learning to revere it as much as the daily sunrise.

Today, as a bioregional herbalist, forager, and author, John is widely recognized as an expert in the edible and medicinal plants of the Sonoran Desert, which stretches from Southern California into Arizona and Mexico. His books *Southwest Foraging* and *Southwest Medicinal Plants* guide readers through more than 110 wild plants found in the desert, offering practical wisdom on how to gather and process them. From savoring fresh mulberries along a desert path to brewing a soothing sun tea from desert willow flowers, his books cover the many ways the desert provides. They also emphasize the importance of foraging responsibly, teaching readers not only how to harvest these plants, but also how to honor the land that sustains them.

“The Sonoran Desert is one of the most biodiverse regions in the U.S.,” John said. “It is also wetter than many people expect – this region experiences two rainy seasons, which bring remarkable abundance, and as you head further south into the Sonoran Desert, the plant life becomes even more diverse.”

This deep understanding of the desert’s landscape has made John a sought-after expert in foraging. Through his business, [Desert Forager](#), he highlights one of the desert’s ubiquitous gems: the prickly pear cactus. John has turned the vibrant fruit into a variety of products, including Prickly Pear & Lime Shrub Syrup, Prickly Pear Chia Lemonade, and Prickly Pear Tepache.

Though the pandemic dealt a heavy blow to Desert Forager, the business is steadily rebounding. Tucson’s restaurants, bars, and breweries, such as Five Points, Voltron Brewing, Good Oak Bar and Hotel Congress, have embraced John’s prickly pear products, incorporating them into their menus. As awareness of prickly pear’s nutritional benefits continues to grow, John is working hard to increase production to meet the rising demand, eager to share the cactus’ healing power with a wider audience.

When asked about his love for prickly pear, John’s passion is palpable. “You could consume prickly pear daily for its taste or for its benefits, which range from easing musculoskeletal inflammation and arthritis to helping with high blood pressure, diabetes, insulin sensitivity, acid reflux, and even cancer prevention,” he explained. “Probably 75% of the people taking medications in our region, if not more, are checking off at least one of those boxes. It’s incredible to me that prickly pear could be assisting in all of them, and it could be enjoyable.”



To share his knowledge, John offers educational opportunities in bioregional herbalism and foraging. He teaches courses in field botany, plant energetics, wildcrafting and herbal medicine making. His offerings range from short three-day courses like *Becoming a Bioregional Herbalist* to more in-depth programs like the 8-month *Introduction to Foraging in the Sonoran Desert*.

John is driven by the transformation he sees in his students. He explained, "Initially, I wanted to create an army of herbalists, but I realized that wasn't realistic. Over time, I understood that the true power of plants lies in simply being present with them, which is what I help people experience. I started focusing less on the scientific facts and more on building a deeper, intuitive relationship with nature. It's not about becoming an herbalist – it's about immersing yourself in nature, listening to the plants, and finding your true path, whatever that may be. This resonates with people from all walks of life, whether they've spent 30 years in corporate America and now face cancer, or those simply feeling lost and seeking change in their daily lives."

John's journey to herbalist and forager began in his 20s during the early days of the Global War on Terror. Feeling unmoored, he left the United States in search of a new life. His travels took him through Mexico, Central, and South America, eventually leading him to Brazil, where he thought he might settle for good. But something unexpected happened – he began to have vivid dreams of Tucson.

"I had four consecutive days where I woke up dreaming about Tucson, and the name kept echoing in my mind," he recalled. "At first, I resisted it – wondering why I was thinking about Tucson when I was in Brazil. But shortly after, within days of those dreams, I watched a sunset, and I just knew I had to return."

Initially, life in Tucson wasn't easy. John felt lost, unsure of where he was headed on a personal and professional level. But after reading one of James Beard Award Winning author and ethnobotanist Gary Nabhan's books on the Sonoran Desert's abundance, he found a sense of grounding. Inspired, he threw himself into learning everything he could about the desert's unique plants. He spent increasing amounts of time in Mexico, and it was during this period that he met someone who would change his life forever – his "Mexican mom," the late Doña Olga Ruíz Cañez.

Though Doña Olga's ancestry was tied to the indigenous Tohono O'odham and Seri tribes, she had little cultural connection to those groups. Instead, she was linked to a unique and historically marginalized group in Sonora known as the *pajareros*, or "bird people." They were migrant peoples known for – amongst other things, such as healing – capturing wild birds, placing them in cages, and selling them in towns. "They

were considered the lowest rung of the cultural ladder," John explained, "but they had their own distinct, significant cultural identity."



Though the pajareros were often seen as poor, John recognized that Doña Olga's deep knowledge of the natural world made her life profoundly rich. "She has essentially always been very close to the land. No doubt, she was born right on the earth," he said. Even as a young child, she showed a natural aptitude for understanding the land and its rhythms. That innate connection deepened when, at just 9 or 10 years old, she began caring for her father, who had lost the use of his legs due to post-polio syndrome. With their mother gone, she and her siblings stepped into caregiving roles, and it was during this time that her sensitivity to the natural world truly came even more sharply into focus.

Through Doña Olga's life experience, John found his own deep connection to the landscape. "That's how I approach herbalism too – understanding the plants, people, and place as interconnected," he said. "She educated me through her unique life experience, and through her, I've developed my own cultural connection to this landscape, a direct lineage through her and the greater milieu of 20th century Sonoran culture."

In honoring Doña Olga's legacy, John has dedicated his life to reviving a dying form of knowledge. What was once on the brink of being forgotten is now experiencing a resurgence, and John is committed to making foraging and herbalism approachable for a wider range of students, inviting them to reconnect with nature in a way that is both accessible and transformative.

"I often tell people it's about returning to being five years old, when you had no preconceptions and were just curious," John said. "Ironically, I had an indigenous herbalist join me recently for a session, and she said it reminded her of when her grandfather took her to the forest as a child. He'd say, 'Sit with this plant and just feel it and listen,' then leave her alone to observe. When he returned, he'd ask, 'What did you feel?' It was about discovering what was inside her and how the natural world brought that out. That's what I want to help my students achieve."



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