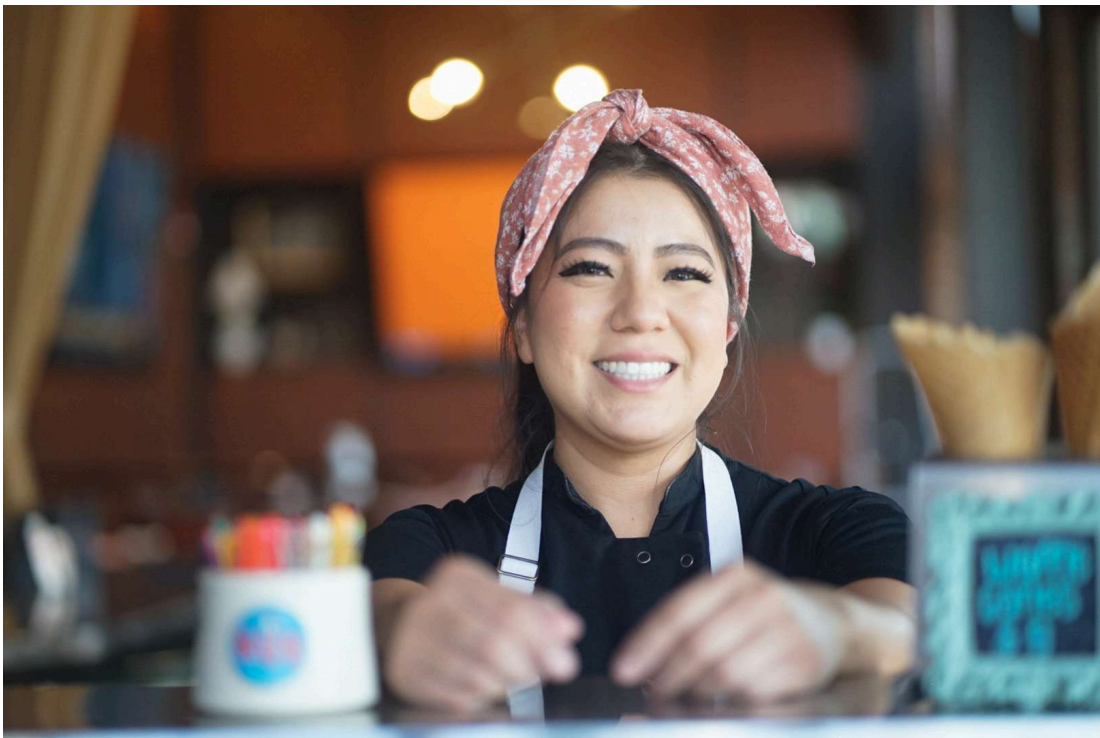


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tucson **MEET OUR** *makers*

Kayla Draper's confections are true masterpieces. But the journey that led her to this point is even sweeter. Read on to discover more about Kayla, a proud member of the Navajo Nation, or click the link below for the latest media highlights from Tucson.

[What's New in Tucson](#)



Meet Kayla Draper

Kayla Draper's reputation as a rising star in the world of confections preceded our interview, and after speaking with her, it was clear why. A member of the Navajo Nation and a graduate of Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts – Scottsdale, Kayla has spent 15 years carving out a name for herself in Tucson's culinary scene. Her journey includes leading dessert programs at renowned resorts like Miraval Arizona Resort & Spa and innovative spots like BATA, which earned a spot on Bon Appétit's list of "Best

New Restaurants of 2022.” She also managed the high-volume pastry department at Prep & Pastry, helping it expand into five Arizona locations while earning a reputation for her relentless work ethic.

Today, Kayla is back in the kitchen with Executive Chef Omar Huerta, a mentor she met early in her career at North Italia. Together, they’re at the helm of HUB Restaurant & Ice Creamery, where they’re revitalizing the classic American menu through bold presentations and regional ingredients. Seasonal desserts like mesquite tiramisu (crafted from flour made from the ubiquitous tree of the Sonoran Desert) and pumpkin cheesecake with pepitas showcase Kayla’s flair for putting creative twists on comfort food favorites.

But that’s not all – Kayla is also balancing her work in the kitchen with her studies at the University of Arizona, where she’s pursuing a Business Management degree. As she puts it, she’s “the oldest freshman ever,” but she’s determined that the effort will pay off in the long run.

Despite her demanding schedule, Kayla’s long-term vision remains crystal clear – and it’s deeply connected to her roots. She fondly recalls her childhood summers spent with her extended family on the Navajo Nation, where she immersed herself in traditional practices. Whether it was butchering sheep, grinding corn by hand, or learning about edible plants found on the Nation, those moments shaped her both personally and professionally. “My family is very traditional up there,” Kayla said. “But the thing I remember most was working with my aunts and grandmas in the kitchen.”



At just 9 years old, Kayla participated in a Kinaaldá, a sacred Puberty Ceremony for Navajo girls. Lasting four days, the ceremony requires the girl to stay awake while completing spiritual tasks that connect her with the Holy People through song, prayer, and physical challenges. For Kayla, the experience was both demanding and transformative. She remembers running in each cardinal direction, pushing herself to the limit before returning to the safety of the Hogan. Yet, one ritual stood out – the process of preparing a cake.

“This was my first real experience with an old style of baking,” she explains. “I had to grind my own corn with two stones, which took about a day or two... The interesting part is that the cake is baked underground. You dig a big hole, cover it with corn husks, and mix your batter, which is made from the corn I ground, wheat germ, water, and white sugar. You place the batter inside the husks, cover it with more husks, and fill the hole with hot coals and dirt. Then, you light a fire on top and let it bake from sunset to sunrise – anywhere from 10 to 12 hours. In the morning, you remove the fire, let it cool, and when you lift the cake out of the husks, it’s baked right onto them. It’s incredible.”

This experience, steeped in tradition, was just one of many that shaped Kayla’s passion for cooking. Growing up as the oldest of her siblings, with parents working long hours, Kayla became the de facto chef for her family. The lessons she learned on the

Navajo Nation followed her back to Tucson, where she continued to blend the flavors of her heritage with her contemporary culinary skills.

Over the past year, she's been experimenting with a recipe that combines frybread and doughnuts, one that's "almost there," she said with a laugh. Her blue corn macarons, which come in two varieties – one with traditional fire ash and one without – are a personal favorite. She's also proud of a pinon cookie and brittle she makes using nuts hand-harvested from the Navajo Nation. For now, these recipes remain close to her heart, shared only with family and close friends as she perfects them.

For Kayla, it's all about finding creative ways to bring Navajo flavors into the modern culinary world. "A lot of the changes up there on the Nation are slower when it comes to incorporating new culinary ideas," she explains. "So, on a personal level, I'm just trying to find different ways to bring those flavors into 2025."



It's clear that Kayla isn't just creating desserts – she's redefining what it means to blend tradition with innovation, while never losing sight of the heritage that shaped her.

Kayla's drive and sense of purpose are deeply rooted in the example set by her parents. Though they moved to Tucson seeking educational and economic opportunities, their connection to Indigenous communities has remained steadfast throughout their careers. Her father, a successful architect, has dedicated his work to building schools and hospitals on Native American reservations, while her mother works in finance, providing accounting services to the San Xavier Health Center, which

offers outpatient primary care to Tohono O'odham members and other eligible American Indians.

“They’ve always inspired me to pursue my education and push myself further,” Kayla said. “I want to give back to my community on the Navajo Nation and help build a better future for everyone there.”

This deep blend of family, heritage, and ambition is at the core of Kayla’s vision for her future – a future where she can pay forward the support and values that have shaped her. Her loftiest long-term goal is to partner with her father to create an entertainment hub on the Navajo Nation. This space would not only showcase her culinary and confectionary talents but also provide a sales platform for local artisans, many of whom currently rely on flea markets to share their work.

“Being able to give back to my community while working within it is a huge part of my vision. I see my education, my experience in the kitchen, and working closely with my dad as the perfect foundation for bringing these worlds together,” Kayla said. “Right now, if you want entertainment, you have to leave the reservation. It’s a long drive, and it takes time and money, yet the Navajo Nation is a major tourist destination. There’s so much potential for something big.”



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