

Three vibrant red chili peppers are arranged against a solid black background. One pepper is positioned vertically in the center, pointing downwards. Two other peppers are positioned at the bottom, one on the left and one on the right, also pointing downwards. The peppers have a glossy texture and green stems.

# SAVORING ARIZONA

GRAND CUISINE  
IN THE GRAND  
CANYON STATE

*By Dayton Fandray*

**F**rom where I sit tonight, the world looks almost impossibly good. ■ The young couple at the table next to mine is lost in rapt conversation. From what I can make out, they are celebrating an anniversary. Six months, maybe a year. At their age, I doubt that it could be more. On my right sits another couple, older and more worldly. Their conversation is quiet but animated, and focuses on the wineglasses on the table between them. There seems to be a fervent difference of opinion about a

certain pinot noir that either should, or should not, have been ordered.

Beyond this second couple, a window rises to the ceiling, and beyond it I see the lights of Tucson spread out below us like some distant galaxy. I could get lost here, I think to myself. And in fact I almost do drift off into a quiet place of my own. But a voice draws me back.

"Your next course, sir, is the garlic shrimp. That's Guaymas shrimp in garlic butter, served on a chipotle molasses sweet potato croquette, with roasted and smoked corn coulis, huitlacoche mojo, red chile oil, and micro amaranth salad. Enjoy."

The waiter sets the plate on the table and glides noiselessly away. The aroma of garlic and red chile oil pulls me persuasively back into the here and now. The flavors blend exquisitely, but as I savor them my attention drifts again. This time, back to the kitchen where this food was prepared. It was only an hour ago that I stood in a corner of that kitchen, watching with awe the barely controlled chaos of food preparation on a commercial scale.

There, amid a blur of waiters, waitresses, runners and line cooks, I watched plate after plate—just like the plate of shrimp on the table in front of me—take form. With two private parties in process and a dining room full of walk-ins, the kitchen was a hum of activity that grew more hectic as new orders were placed.

Whenever the situation seemed tense, however, a compact bear of a man clad simply in black slacks and a spotless white jacket appeared. "Let's go! Let's go!" he cajoled, moving instinctively to the stations where direction was needed. There was no mistaking this man's authority in the kitchen, but his commands were

calm and measured. He was firm when a firm hand was needed, but quick with a compliment when his expectations were met. And when the crisis passed, he disappeared quickly into the shadows, on his way back to the peace and quiet of the dining room, where he moved from table to table, greeting diners with the easy manner of a man who didn't have a care in the world.

This is Janos Wilder and the setting is Janos, the eponymously named restaurant that he owns and manages

on the grounds of Tucson's Westin La Paloma Resort and Spa. I am here on this busy Friday evening not because the performance put on by the restaurant

staff—impressive though it is—is unique. I am quite sure, in fact, that it is being duplicated tonight at successful restaurants around the city and, yes, at restaurants all around the world. I am here, rather, because Wilder is one of a growing group of chefs and restaurateurs who are redefining the culinary borders of the



**JANOS WILDER IS ONE OF A GROWING GROUP OF CHEFS AND RESTAURATEURS WHO ARE REDEFINING ARIZONA'S CUISINE.**

Grand Canyon State. Once known primarily for its deserts, putting greens and roadrunners, Arizona is earning a national reputation as a great place to dine.

**T**he notion of an Arizona cuisine might seem strange to most Americans. At best, the popular image of a good restaurant out here is a rustic steakhouse with sawdust on the floor. At worst, it's the humble corner burrito stand.



The truth is, for those interested in a taste of folksy Southwest Americana, there are plenty of those venues left. But those Western artifacts now share the dining scene with restaurants such as Janos and Café Poca Cosa in Tucson, and Mary Elaine's and Roaring Fork in Scottsdale. One can even experience the new wave of Arizona cuisine in rural communities such as Winslow, where The Turquoise Room at La Posada Hotel stands as an outpost of culinary adventure in the land of the Hopi, Navajo and Zuni.

In 2000, the James Beard Foundation named Wilder the Best Chef in the Southwest. *Food & Wine* magazine named Mary Elaine's Bradford Thompson one of the Top 10 Best New Chefs in America. And in 2003, *Gourmet* magazine featured Robert McGrath's Roaring Fork as one of America's Best Restaurants. So the chefs

and restaurateurs of Arizona have indeed been sharing the national spotlight in recent years. What they don't share, however, is a common culinary vision, or even a belief that Arizona cuisine, as a distinct style of cooking, actually exists.

Wilder, for example, likes the idea of a cuisine unique to the state. "I would be delighted," he says, "to think that there's something you could call 'Arizona.' But I'm not sure how you would define it. It would have to be based on our cultural heritage here, and our unique ingredients."

Bradford Thompson, however, scoffs at the idea of an Arizona cuisine. As chef de cuisine at The Phoenician resort's very exclusive Mary Elaine's dining room, he serves what he refers to as "modern French" cuisine. He is a purist, and the very notion of creating any sort of culinary fusion annoys him.

"I am not interested in doing French food with a Southwestern twist, or Southwestern food in the French style," he says. "I am aware of what ingredients are in season, but I won't be building menus around prickly pears."

And Thompson is true to his word.

When I dine at Mary Elaine's the following week, chipotle molasses and red chile oil are conspicuously absent from his autumn menu. There is a bit of chorizo in the crispy-skin loup de mer "Basquaise," and a fennel compote, which could arguably bespeak a local tilt in the evening's fare, chorizo being the local Mexican sausage and fennel growing abundant and wild in the

mountains to the south. But the accent is decidedly French. And delicious. This is easily as good a meal as I have eaten anywhere in my travels.

So does this mean that Arizona cuisine is as meaningless a concept as Ohio cuisine, say, or Nebraska cuisine?

Not really, counters Janos Wilder. The special thing about Arizona is that fresh ingredients are available all year round, and fresh ingredients make chefs as well as their customers happy. Freshness is, he says, the essence of French cooking, which is in fact his first love. The California-born chef trained in France before settling down in Tucson in 1983 to be close to his wife's family. It was in France that he learned what he considers to be the secret of the successful kitchen.

"When I went to France I learned all sorts of things," Wilder explains, "but I think the primary thing that I learned was that the heart and soul of French cooking was the relationship between the chef and the gardener, and that the things that were closest to you were always the best things to work with. So when I came to Tucson and I wanted to cook French food and be true to that philosophical underpinning, I had to use the ingredients that were around us. We started advertising for gardeners back in '83 before we advertised for staff. And we built the restaurant pretty much from the ground up in that way."

For Janos, this meant delving into a brave new world of chiles and beans and squash, which led ultimately to an unexpected blend of local ingredients with French cooking techniques. "Initially," he recalls, "the ingredients were all so new. You look to your ingredients for your inspiration. Those are your sources of inspiration—ingredients, flavors and texture."

If Bradford Thompson draws his inspiration from a more traditional palette of ingredients, he benefits no less from Arizona's year-round growing season. So freshness, at the very least, might be considered the fundamental quality of Arizona cuisine.

But culture is also a very big part of it.

I feel the effect of this culture in the dining room at Janos, and even in the staid and ever-so-refined dining room at Mary Elaine's. But it's not in the food or the service or even the decor. It's in the view. Both restaurants are perched in the foothills of their respective cities and both offer sweeping views of the valleys

**AT ROARING FORK IN SCOTTSDALE, ROBERT MCGRATH EXPLORES ARIZONA'S WESTERN HERITAGE THROUGH DISHES SUCH AS GREEN CHILE MACARONI WITH SUGAR-AND-CHILE-CURED DUCK BREAST (TOP LEFT), LAMB CHOPS WITH A NEW MEXICO FONDUE POT, PISTACHIO BREAD AND SQUASH (TOP RIGHT), AND A COLORFUL TOMATO SALAD (BOTTOM RIGHT).**

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**BRADFORD THOMPSON'S  
"MODERN FRENCH" CUISINE AT  
MARY ELAINE'S HAS WON HIM  
RECOGNITION AS ONE OF THE  
COUNTRY'S TOP CHEFS.**

below. In the dark, the city lights sweeping out like sparkling lakes that lap up against the far side of these valleys, I realize that I could be no place other than the Great American West. These vistas are as much a part of the dining experience as the chipotle molasses and the fennel.

Talk about the Great American West and you find yourself juggling a wealth of iconic images. You have the prehistoric Anasazi people and the great Native American nations of modern history. You have conquistadores and the Mexican settlers who claimed this land prior to the War with Mexico and the Gadsden Purchase. And you have a pioneering cowboy culture that persists even into the 21st century.

This cultural heritage is not lost on Arizona's chefs, says Roaring Fork's Robert McGrath. When he left The Phoenixian's Windows on the Green in 1997 to start his own restaurant, he had already established a reputation as a "Southwestern" chef. He made a conscious decision to further explore Arizona's Western heritage at Roaring Fork.

"Going American Western offered me the availability of ingredients from the Mississippi River to the

California coast, and from Montana to Mexico," he explains. "This half of the United States has a pioneering spirit. When you look at Lewis and Clark and the Conestoga wagons, there's a lot of that pioneering connotation there. It's one of the parts of the country that hasn't been fully developed yet. So the idea here was to try and capture that Western feeling, that pioneering spirit, and temper it with comfort."

That spirit is present in Roaring Fork's woody, lodgelike decor, as well as in a menu that features such items as a beef tenderloin fillet with whiskey "shellac," chile cheese grits and green chile macaroni and cheese. For chefs such as McGrath, who have stepped out of the kitchen to become restaurateurs, the goal, ultimately, is an interplay between ambiance and menu that leads to an extraordinary dining experience.

"It's all intertwined," he says. "You can't make a type of food and have it fit into a space that's so abstract that there's no synergy between the two. For me, the menu has to reflect the building, the dining room and the restaurant, and vice versa: The restaurant needs to reflect the food. When people come in, they want to experience the whole package. They want the thing to make sense to them."

John Sharpe makes a similar attempt to acknowledge local history and culture at his restaurant, The Turquoise Room, in rural Winslow. Situated in northeastern Arizona in the Four Corners region, The Turquoise Room's menus reflect the Native American heritage that is so pervasive in this part of the state. At the same time, Sharpe is well aware that La Posada

Hotel, where the restaurant is located, has a rich history of its own. Managed by legendary hotelier and restaurateur Fred Harvey to serve travelers on the Santa Fe



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**—SUZANA DAVILA**



**AT CAFÉ POCA COSA IN TUCSON, SUZANA DAVILA PREPARES FOOD HEAVILY INFLUENCED BY HER TRAVELS IN MEXICO.**



**AT THE TURQUOISE ROOM IN WINSLOW, JOHN SHARPE CREATES DISHES THAT REFLECT THE REGION'S NATIVE AMERICAN HERITAGE.**

Railroad, the hotel is a beautifully restored artifact of America's westward migration. So Sharpe incorporates a number of menu items in the Harvey tradition, as well.

The 58-year-old native of Hartlepool, England, says that he is not consciously trying to create an

"Arizona style" of cooking. But because he believes strongly in the importance of being part of the community and using fresh, local ingredients whenever possible, it just works out that way.

"What we're involved with right now at The Turquoise Room," he says, "has more to do with where we're located geographically and a lot of the ingredients around us: the piki bread from the Hopi reservation; the pit-roasted corn from the Navajo reservation; the tepary beans that I get from the Papago Indians. Right now I have a dish on the menu that I think is pretty typical of the thing I do. I cook the tepary beans as a French cassoulet dish. A bean cassoulet. But I put red chile in it and cook it with goose and with elk and with buffalo. So instead of having the lamb, goose, duck or chicken of the normal French style, it's Southwesternized."

**W**hen you look at the cultural influences that have shaped Arizona, particularly the southern part of the state, the one that dominates, practically to the point of ubiquity, is the culture of Mexico. Mexican food, however, usually gets short shrift in discussions of the state's restaurants. A burrito is a burrito is a burrito, seems to be the prevailing culinary wisdom.

Suzana Davila has other | **to page 92**



**from page 24** | ideas. When this self-taught cook from Guaymas, Sonora, opened the Café Poca Cosa some two decades ago, she took it as her mission to show her customers a dazzling brand of Mexican cooking that makes a quantum leap beyond the everyday burrito.

"I was aware that there were a lot of Mexican restaurants in town, and every one is wonderful," she recalls. "But they were offering your typical tacos and enchiladas and chiles rellenos. I wanted to do something different."

She found her inspiration during the course of her travels through Mexico, travels that took her to regions seldom visited by Americans who know only "la Frontera," the Mexico that borders the United States.

"As you travel through the regions of Mexico, you find really unique cooking. So I started bringing in some chiles that people had never heard of, and I started making my sauces and my moles. People were open to being more aware of the fact that there's not just a chocolate mole. I make something like 26, 27 different moles. Red moles, yellow moles, green moles, and then the chocolate mole that I also make different ways."

All of this creativity on the part of Arizona's chefs would be squandered, however, if there weren't a pool of diners curious enough to enjoy it. And it is here again that chefs in Arizona enjoy a considerable advantage over their counterparts in Ohio, say, or Nebraska. Arizona is booming these days. The population centers of Phoenix and Tucson are growing so rapidly that it is no longer a joke when locals rue the day that the two cities will meet each other halfway, somewhere in the currently empty stretch of Sonoran Desert along Interstate 10. At the same time, the legions of winter visitors are generally affluent, and they have traveled enough to be tantalized by the thought of a meal that transcends the ordinary.

"Because of the demographics of this area, we get people who are well traveled, people who are knowledgeable about food," says Scottsdale-based

Robert McGrath. "They may not want the abstract, but they know what's good and bad."

Janos Wilder has seen the same thing at his restaurant in Tucson and at Kai, the restaurant at the Sheraton Wild Horse Pass Resort and Spa, where he serves as consulting chef.

"We get a lot of tourists who have high expectations for dining out and for restaurants," he notes. "And they're the same people who have eaten last week in New York and the week before maybe in Munich or anywhere else in the world. So when they eat here, they have higher expectations of what they're going to find and what they want. That helps us a lot."

Beyond the shared sense of place and a fondness for the fresh ingredients that abound here, I have noticed that Arizona's chefs have one last thing in common: their seemingly boundless enthusiasm for delivering a memorable experience to each and every customer who walks into their dining rooms.

"The passion for cooking has got to be there," says Mary Elaine's Thompson.

"Everything you do comes down to one thing," agrees Janos. "That's cooking—cooking good food and creating warm experiences for people."

I see this passion time and again during my visits to kitchens and dining rooms around the state of Arizona. But one moment in particular stays with me. It is the night of my visit to Janos the restaurant. Another crisis averted, Janos the man is getting ready to attend to his customers in the dining room. As he turns to leave, however, he sees two plates of Colorado Lamb Two Ways that chef de cuisine John Harings has just brought up to the serving line.

Janos stops for a moment and smiles, a look of sublime satisfaction crossing his face. "Those are beautiful, you guys," he says. And a beat later he is gone.

Yes, I think, it is great to be here in this corner of this kitchen tonight. Indeed, the world could not look better. ▲

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