

# THE FERTILE DESERT

**Andrea Yu** ventures along the fringes of Arizona's Sonoran Desert and discovers arid landscapes, farms and orchards bearing an unexpected array of crops.



ABOVE: Long table dinners hosted by Cloth & Flame incorporate ingredients from nearby Arizona farmers and producers





ABOVE: Arizona was once a major grower for Sunkist

**O**F ALL THE cacti in the Sonoran Desert, there's one in particular I'm keeping my distance from.

Not that an accidental encounter with any spiky species would be welcome (plucking cacti spines from one's skin is a rite of passage for any Arizonan, I'm told), but I was warned about one especially menacing cactus called the cholla.

Its nickname – the jumping cactus – comes from what it does if you so much as brush up against this menacing succulent. Somewhat like the persistent latching of dried burrs (but with much more pain and, well, blood), a dill pickle-sized portion of the cholla will detach itself and cling onto your clothing or exposed flesh.

So I'm surprised that our desert guide, through the Fort McDowell Yavapi Nation lands, a particularly arid but picturesque portion of the Sonoran, tells us that native populations of the desert have used the cholla as a source of food.

To demonstrate this, Cowboy Don, as he prefers to be called, wrangles a segment of the cholla. It's skewered at the edge of a pocket knife that he's grasping with a construction-gloved hand.

The key to taming the cholla lies in many

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of your pockets. With a small lighter, Don sets the cactus segment on fire, the flames spreading quickly as the spikes curl under the heat and wither away.

Once the fire dies, Don slices the cholla in half lengthwise and carves out individual segments of cactus flesh for us to taste. It's incredibly slimy and juicier than I would have expected desert produce to be, with a hue of a cucumber that's had its skin just barely peeled and a similar, but firmer, texture.

It shouldn't come as a surprise how juicy the cholla flesh is as the Sonoran is one of the wettest deserts on the globe. The succulent is particularly adept at retaining moisture from every raindrop that falls near its roots. But thankfully, there's tastier vegetation growing along the fringes of the Sonoran, as I discover during my time in Arizona.

It didn't take much of a trek to stumble across one of the characteristic food exports of the region. On a leisurely run in the residential neighbourhood around my accommodations in Mesa, a suburb just

northeast of Phoenix, my usual jogging pace has slowed considerably as I'm distracted by the vegetation growing on front lawns (while also trying not to trip over myself).

It takes all my self-restraint not to reach over a fence or property line and pluck a juicy orange – yes, orange – off of the trees that proliferate among the homes of local Arizonans. I might expect to spot citrus casually growing in a Florida or California backyard, but I'm surprised to see them here. I'm visiting at the peak of the citrus harvest, so these oranges are at their orangest, ripe and ready for picking.

Arizona is, in fact, a major citrus grower and used to be one of Sunkist's largest during the 1950s and 60s. The state's biggest and oldest orchard (and a former Sunkist partner) is now a family-run farm known as B&B Citrus. It supplies citrus to local grocers but it attracts significant foot traffic from visitors and Arizonans that make a point of seeking out their sweet citrus offerings.

Maybe I've been influenced or charmed by the story I've just heard, but I'm convinced that the sample slice of navel orange is the tastiest segment of citrus I've had in recent memory. It's fresh, juicy and sweet. Logic and reasoning about the amount of citrus I'm able to consume during a five-day vacation go out the window as I fill a bag full of navel oranges, Minneola tangelos and grapefruits. I'm certain I can extend this affair with the state's unofficial fruit as long as possible.

Another unexpected crop appears as I venture south along the outskirts of Mesa and into Gilbert where 7,500 olive trees, sprawled out over 120 acres, are grown and milled on-site. The history of Queen Creek Olive Mill isn't as long – the Rea family moved here in 1997 from Detroit (they lived in London, Ontario prior to that) – but they've managed to make a significant impact on the community. They produce Arizona's only 100 per cent extra virgin olive oil from over a dozen different olive varieties originating from Greece, Italy, Spain and California. Unlike many of these regions, the warmer winter weather in Arizona helps extend the growing season of the olives.

Their gift shop is bustling with a non-stop flow of customers when we visit. As well, the café and bistro are popular destinations, with the menu incorporating the viscous green liquid into many of the options, including a decadent array of cupcakes.

But the best way to experience olive oil is to taste the unadulterated stuff. Their "robust" oil, made from early-harvest olives,

## AGRITOPIA IS EQUAL PARTS IMPRESSIVE PLANNING AND SCIENCE FICTION IN ITS EXECUTION

still green from the tree, results in a bold and peppery oil while their "delicate" oil that uses olives left to ripen in the sun has a smooth and nutty flavour.

Olive harvest runs from October to November, so I, unfortunately, miss it during my mid-winter visit, but it's easy to envision the chaos that ensues in Queen Creek's milling room once the olives are ready for picking. Their robustly flavoured oil is best

pressed fresh off the tree so their milling machine, imported from Turkey, runs 24-7 during peak harvest season. The demand is so high for Arizona olive oil that they source crops from nearby farmers to meet their production requirements.

But further south in Gilbert, I discover that not all of the farms in the region have stuck to traditional growing practices.

One of the most interesting operations I visited had its humble beginnings as a hay farm (fun fact: Gilbert, Arizona was once known as the Hay Capital of the World). Joe Johnson's parents bought land here in 1960 and when he took over the farm in the 2000s, Johnson transformed the property into a new-age planned community with 452 residential plots built with low fences and shared spaces to encourage communication between neighbours. The concept, called Agritopia, is equal parts impressive planning and science fiction in its execution.

But one element of Agritopia that feels a little more familiar, at least to us city-dwelling Torontonians, is a facility called Barnone that is set up in a former grain storage structure. The facility's organizers invited ten local entrepreneurs to operate small businesses ►



ABOVE: Arizona's desert climate and warmer winters extend the state's olive growing season



# AMONG THE CACTI, A TABLE IS SET AND A RUSTIC CART IS SERVING TOM COLLINS

► in the facility. An independent hairdresser sits across from a greeting card maker, while a meeting space at the end of the building hosts workshops and meetings.

Diagrams above a work table show detailed line drawings of a deli slicer and the KitchenAid Mixer – appliances which Johnson's great-grandfather Herbert, an engineer, invented in the early 1900s.

The collaboration and fluidity between the various artisans in Barnone are most evident among its food and drink operations – 12 West Brewing, a pizzeria called Fire and Brimstone and a winery in an adjacent garage. Seating at the pizzeria is limited, so we opted for a seat at the winery, called Garage East. The pizzeria staff had no qualms about walking our pies over to us when ready as it must be a common request.

Once a colourful starter salad, replete with shaved heirloom carrots, beets, radishes and fennel lands on our table, our server at the winery can't help but gush about it being his favourite on the menu, boasting about how all the vegetables in the dish are grown in Agritopia. Toronto's harvest season is fleeting, reaching its peak for a few short months in late summer. But in Arizona, it seems like there's always something in season.

During our last evening, the experience comes full circle as we're back in the desert, en route to a "super secret outdoor location." We wait in the parking lot

of a small airport (specializing in hang glider flights, of all things) for our dinner guide to escort us to our destination. It requires venturing off the main road onto a side street, and off the side street into the desert proper.

Among the splendour of cacti and the unique landscape of the southwest, a long table is set up with a rustic cart serving Tom Collins to guests who have already arrived for the evening.

The meal is strategically timed. As we're finishing our first course – a bright salad of cucumber, tomatoes and radishes (many of which are locally grown in the farming regions we just visited) the sun is just

beginning to set. The sky, slowly turning dark, glows in a similarly impressive array of hues to rival our dish. Saguaro cacti – the iconic

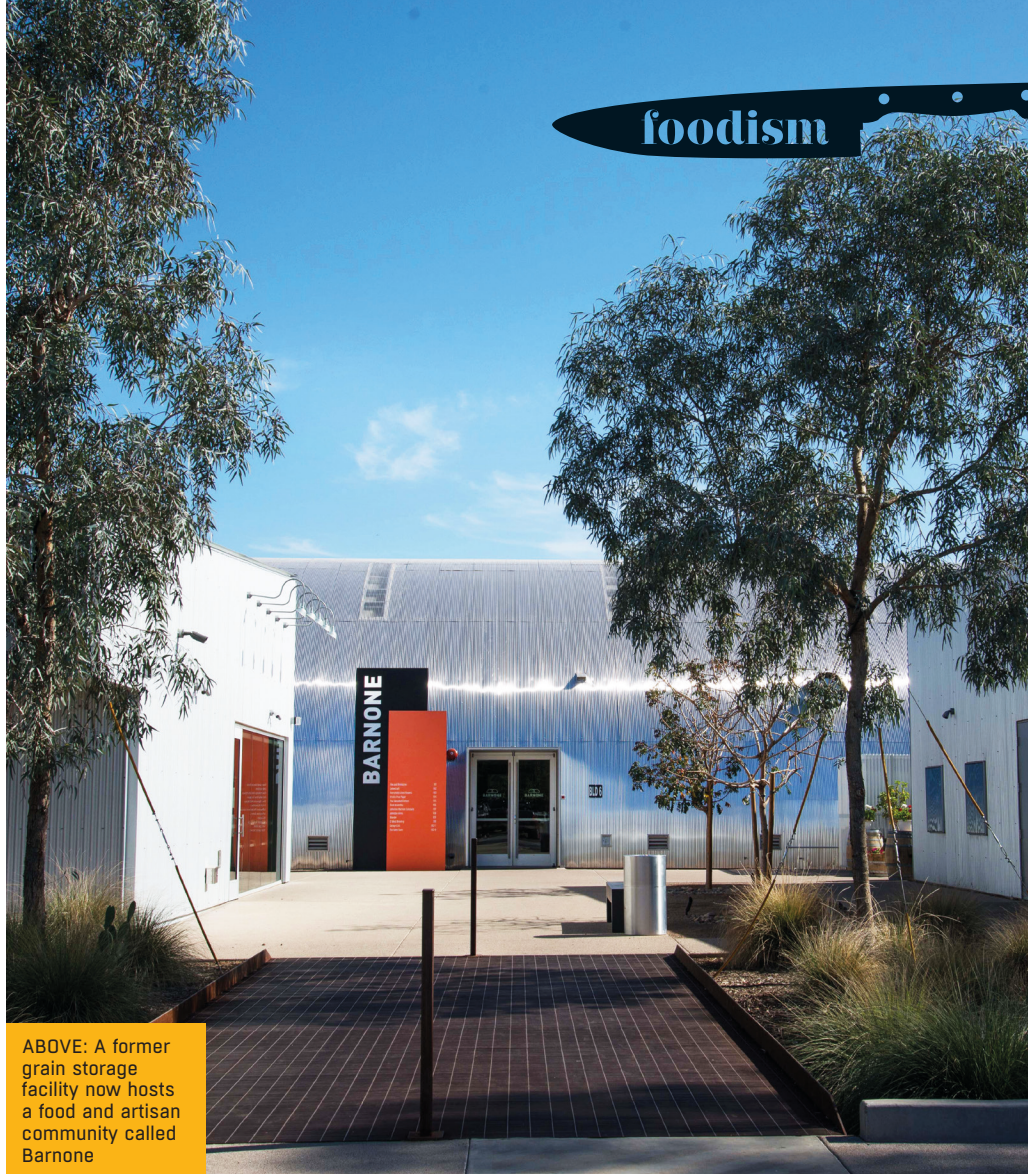
symbols of Arizona with their cartoonish curved arms – tower in the background.

As daylight escapes us, fairy lights strung over the dinner table come to life, as does the conversation with my 30-plus crew of dinner companions thanks to the cocktails and glasses of Arizonian wine (from Agritopia's Garage East) we've swilled.

In the middle of dessert (in the middle of the desert), the music and lights turn off abruptly. For a second I worry that the generator powering our off-the-grid experience may have died, prematurely cutting our evening short.

Our dinner organizer rushes over. He's shut off the power on purpose to draw our attention to the moon. It has just risen above the horizon, glowing a bright orange hue and appearing distinctly larger than life.

Above, an incredible blanket of twinkling lights has illuminated the night sky and just for a moment, I forget about the potentially hazardous cacti that surround me. But, I'm still going to stay firmly planted in my seat until the power comes back on. **f**



ABOVE: A former grain storage facility now hosts a food and artisan community called Barnone

