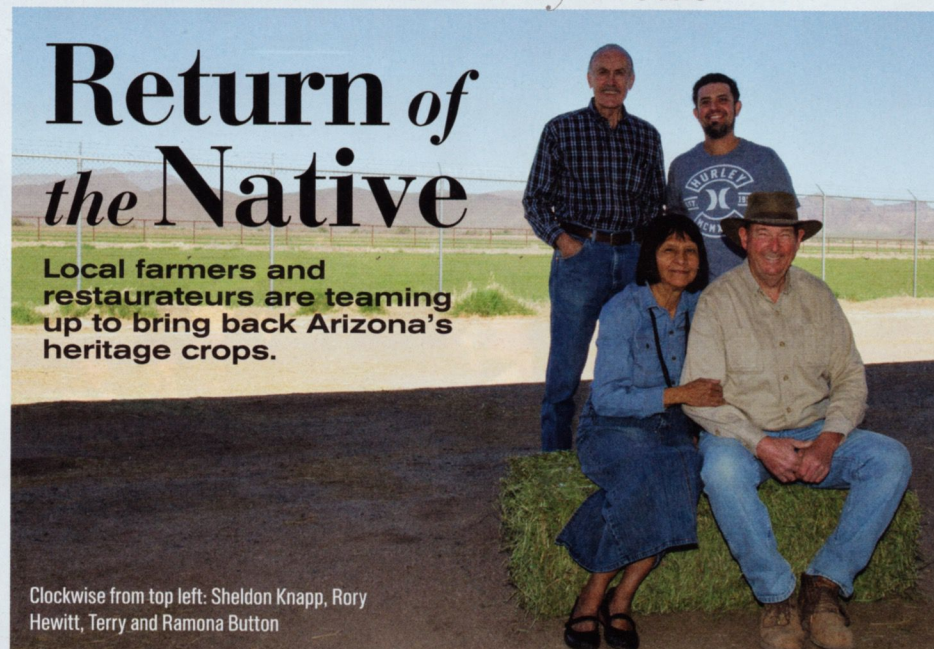


Return of the Native

Local farmers and restaurateurs are teaming up to bring back Arizona's heritage crops.



Clockwise from top left: Sheldon Knapp, Rory Hewitt, Terry and Ramona Button

RAMONA BUTTON is taking us to her emerald-hued fields on the Gila River Reservation and explaining why the whirlwind is the symbol of her farm. Suddenly – as if she conjured it – a dust devil spins into the sky. Whirlwinds, her father once told her, are your ancestors speaking to you. When Ramona inherited a whirlwind-woven basket, she was told, “The whirlwind spreads the seeds of the desert to grow different plants, just as you, a farmer, are spreading these seeds.”

The whirlwind could also describe the changes blowing through the foodie world. Traditions almost totally scattered to the wind are swirling back around, and a few devoted souls are sowing the seeds of heirloom crops and ancestral farming methods. Ramona and Terry Button, who own Ramona Farms near Sacaton, lead the local movement. They’re linking up with restaurants like Phoenix City Grille to introduce Arizonans to our native foods – tepary beans, Pima corn, Sonoran wheat – cooked with a contemporary twist.

“What I’m fascinated with is the heritage of the Southwest, the stories of where the foods came from and, more importantly, the people,” says Phoenix City Grille owner Sheldon Knapp.

And what a story it is. Tepary beans and corn have been cultivated in this area for 4,000 years and were staples for the Akimel O’odham (Pima) and Tohono O’odham (Papago). “Papago” is the Spanish mispronunciation of Papavi Kuadam – “tepary eaters.” But in the early 1900s, the overtapped Gila River turned to dust, and the O’odham’s agricultural economy evaporated. Teparies nearly went extinct.

Enter the Buttons. Terry, the white son of New England farmers, was honorarily adopted by a Lakota Sioux singer/historian and the granddaughter of Chief Red Cloud, who fought to save his Lakotas’ land from the U.S. government in the 1800s. Ramona, the daughter of a Tohono farmer and an Akimel medicine woman, is the granddaughter of the last Pima chief. The couple met in South Dakota when Terry was singing with a band traveling to pow wows and Ramona was a nurse at an Indian hospital. Their children jokingly call them John Smith and Pocahontas.

In 1974, they started farming barley and alfalfa on Ramona’s family land. “Then people from the local community wanted us to start growing tepary beans because no one was doing it,” Terry says, sitting beneath the head of a buffalo he shot with a homemade obsidian arrow. So Ramona rummaged through her father’s trunk in her old adobe-and-arrowweed home and found jars containing tepary seeds.

The couple planted teparies, Pima corn, Sonoran wheat, garbanzos and black-eyed peas (the latter three brought to the Southwest by Jesuit missionaries starting with Padre Eusebio Kino in 1685). “Pretty soon,” Ramona says, “people started coming in from all around asking for them.”

The Buttons supplied reservations near Yuma, Ajo, Sells and Parker. But supermarkets vampirized the barter-friendly trading posts – “the lifeblood of the reservation economy,” Terry says – and tepary demand dwindled in the ’90s and early 2000s. “People started raising their families without them... and pretty soon they’re vaguely re-

membered and purchased by older people as a nostalgic item.”

Enter Sheldon Knapp, who became interested in Southwestern foods thanks to Tucson nonprofit Native Seeds/SEARCH. In 2013, he called Ramona Farms to ask about supplying Phoenix City Grille. That night, after a full day baling hay, Ramona and Terry showed up at the restaurant with a truckful of legumes and grains, grown without pesticides or commercial fertilizers. It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

Now PCG fashions native ingredients into dishes such as smoked pork in guajillo chile tomato broth with tepary beans, and pollo asado with Pima grits. Executive chef Rory Hewitt praises the teparies’ creamy-yet-sturdy texture, and the mesquite-roasted Pima grits’ nutty flavor. “What’s so special about places like Ramona Farms and Native Seeds/SEARCH,” Hewitt says, “is they’re introducing foods that almost got lost.”

But the end of this story is not written, because heirloom crops are not financially sustainable... yet. “We need to preserve these crops,” Terry says. “But the only way they can be preserved is if somebody can make money growing them. And for somebody to buy them... people [have to] believe in it.”

TO PURCHASE these and other Southwestern ingredients, visit ramonafarms.com.

TEPARY BEANS

S-oam Bav (brown, pictured) and S-totoah Bav (white). The world’s most drought-resistant legume is prized for its high protein and fiber content and low glycemic index.



PIMA CLUB WHEAT

O’las Pilkan. The O’odham cook the low-gluten berries (or Sonoran wheat berries) with teparies and cracked Pima corn to make a stew called poshol.

PIMA CORN

The Akimel O’odham roast their heritage corn over a mesquite fire, sundry it, and hand-shell it. Then they grind it roughly into Ga’ivsa – which can be made into porridge or a savory side dish – or finely to make grits, cornmeal, or pinole (often stirred into yogurt or drinks).

