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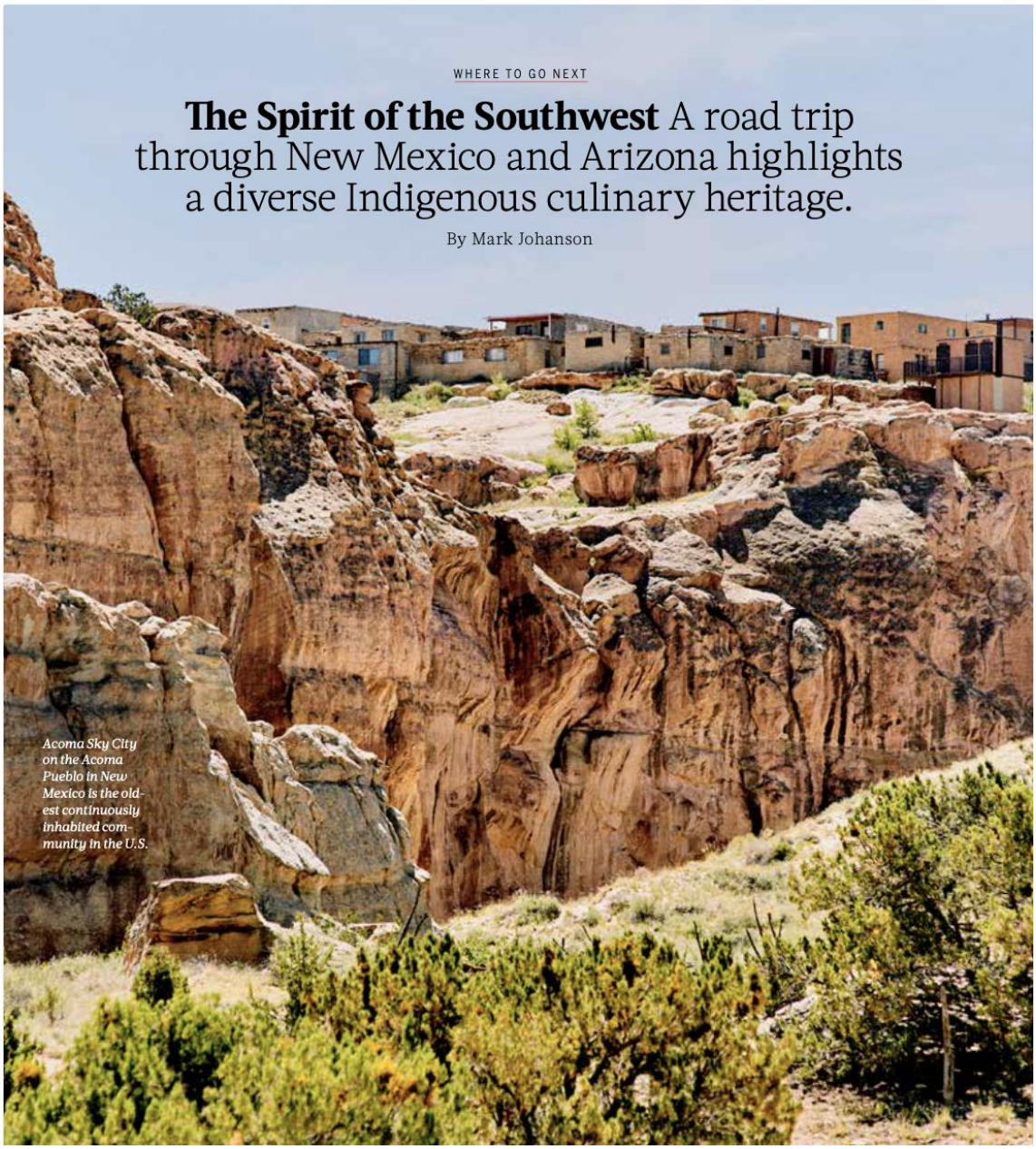
TRAVEL



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LEFT: Rosanne Ghahate welcomes visitors into her home on the Zuni Pueblo for a traditional meal, like this chulea ya wea, an antelope stew with homegrown cilantro and green onions, a culinary experience that can be booked through Zuni Tourism. (See "Take a Tour," p. 87.) OPPOSITE: A traditional adobe home at Acoma Sky City on the Acoma Pueblo in New Mexico.

ROSANNE GHAHATE ENTERED THE DINING ROOM of her adobe home on the Zuni Pueblo in New Mexico, her face wreathed in the steam rising from a stew she cradled between two weathered hands. These are hands that, for most of her life, have been busy with the intricate beadwork she proudly displays on a shelf in the corner. Before the pandemic, Ghahate traveled the U.S. selling Indigenous art from the 19 pueblos, or traditional Indigenous settlements in the Southwest, located in present-day New Mexico to museums across the United States. Over the past two years, however, she's dedicated herself to the culinary arts, working with her son Kenny Bowekaty (of Zuni Tourism) to welcome visitors into her home for the kind of traditional meals that, though common on the pueblos, you won't find in any restaurant.

Ghahate placed the stew on the dining table and asked if I was familiar with the three sisters: beans, squash, and corn. "They've been grown together in the Southwest since long before Europeans arrived" in the 1540s, she explained, adding that they form the backbone of the traditional diet. Modern Puebloan stews often pair the three sisters with mutton, but Ghahate prepares hers with traditional game meats–in this case, antelope (tender, with a hint of sage) that her son hunted beneath the sandstone mesas visible from the window where we sat. This recipe, she said as we dined, looks and tastes about the same as it did over a thousand years ago–which is astonishing when you consider both the loss of culinary knowledge and decreased access to traditional ingredients caused by displacement and colonization.

Ghahate is one of a growing cadre of Indigenous culinary experts in the Southwest who are making it their mission to celebrate, preserve, and share their unique and diverse culinary heritage. Their combined efforts are putting Native cuisine more on the map here than anywhere else in the U.S. Last fall, I took a road trip from Albuquerque to Phoenix, to the tables of chefs and home cooks who, in their restaurants and in their homes, are telling the story of Indigenous cuisine of the Southwest, from its roots prior to European contact and colonization up to modern variations today.

I began in Albuquerque at the Santa Ana Pueblo's luxurious Tamaya Resort and Spa, which overlooks the Sandia Mountains and offers a robust calendar of cultural programming led by members of the pueblo, including pottery workshops and hands-on bread-baking in a traditional stone huruna oven. I then steered west on Historic Route 66 through the scrubby hills of the high desert to Laguna Pueblo, which counts Interior Secretary (and former Hatch chile salsa maker) Deb Haaland as an enrolled member, and to neighboring Acoma Pueblo, whose striking mesa-top Sky City is the oldest continuously inhabited settlement in the U.S. Finally, I arrived in Zuni Pueblo and the Ghahate home before veering north from there to Navajo Nation, located on the largest reservation in the United States, to learn about the dish that has become the most complicated symbol of modern Indigenous cuisine: the Indian taco.

"To understand the Indian taco, you need first to know the painful origins of fry bread," explained Yanua Morgan (Diné), a potter and cook who offers culinary experiences at the Canyon of the Ancients

photography by KYLE RM JOHNSON

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Guest Ranch near the ancestral Puebloan cliff dwellings of Mesa Verde. (The Navajo people call themselves Diné, literally meaning "the people.") Fry bread is a deep-fried flatbread dating back to the 1860s, when the U.S. government forced the Navajo to leave their homes in present-day Arizona on a 300-mile journey known as the "Long Walk" to an internment camp on lands in what is now New Mexico that didn't support their agriculture. The government did not provide adequate food, water, and supplies but gave the Navajo rations of white flour, lard, sugar, and salt. "Soon after, fry bread was born," said Morgan.

Even though some food activists, health care providers for Native communities, and tribal elders consider fry bread a dangerous relic of colonial displacement causing health problems such as diabetes on reservations, its culinary offshoot, the Indian taco, has become a ubiquitous feature of Indigenous gatherings in the Southwest. Morgan prepared hers by draping pinto beans, ground beef, cheddar cheese, chilchin (a tangy sumac berry pudding), and blue mush (roasted blue corn flour mixed with juniper ash and water) atop the pillowy surface of the fry bread. We then washed our tacos down with Navajo tea, an earthy herbal drink brewed from bundled greenthread stems and served in Morgan's own ceramic mugs.

The next morning's drive southwest into Monument Valley took me through staggering vistas: brick-red spindles, flat-topped mesas, and lonesome buttes all lording over the horizon. To the south, I crossed onto the Hopi Reservation and booked a culinary tour through my hotel, the Moenkopi Legacy Inn and Suites, to dine on piki, a wafer-thin bread made by hand-smearing blue cornmeal and juniper ash over a fire-heated cooking stone.

"My grandmother used to make piki, and she'd leave a little batter in the bowl when she finished and tell me to cool off the stove, so that's how I learned to work fast enough not to burn my hand," Hopi cultural activist Iva Honyestewa said as we sat beneath bundles of roasted sweet corn hanging in a small "piki house" behind her place in Second Mesa. Honyestewa said that piki is such a labor-intensive product that it's typically only served at big events like weddings or coming-of-age ceremonies. "I'm the only one in my family who makes it," she shared, "but now I'm teaching my nieces how to do it."

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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *The dining room at Kai in Phoenix, an elevated restaurant showcasing Indigenous ingredients; wild horses roam the Zuni Pueblo; red amaranth growing in the culinary garden at Indian Pueblo Kitchen*

PHOTOGRAPHY: (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) COURTESY SHERATON (KAI RESTAURANT INTERIOR); KYLE RM JOHNSON (2, HORSE AND AMARANTH)

Finally, it was time to cross the pine-covered San Francisco Peaks and descend into the Sonoran Desert, where tubular saguaro cacti guided me to Phoenix. After a midmorning stop at The Heard, a museum of Indigenous art and culture (with an excellent courtyard café), I settled in south of town on the Gila River Indian Community in Arizona, home to the award-winning restaurant Kai.

Kai, meaning "seed" in the Akimel O'odham language, takes inspiration from the foods of the Akimel O'odham and Piipaash (temporarily known as the Pima and Maricopa, respectively, names given by Spanish colonizers), sourcing many ingredients from nearby Ramona Farms, where Ramona Button has helped revive traditional Sonoran crops like tepary beans, a drought-resistant legume–key for food security in a desert environment–that ranges from robust and chocolaty to sweet and buttery in flavor.

Teparies are extremely high in protein and soluble fiber but had all but disappeared from regional diets by the 1990s, when supermarkets replaced trading posts as the local grocery stores. "I'm a nurse, and diabetes is very prevalent here in my tribe, so I thought, 'Let's bring back the foods we used to eat because my father always said they're the best foods you can have,'" explained Button, who now supplies chefs around the country and sells her products online at store.ramonafarms.com.

Like the teparies, nearly everything at Kai–from the menu art to the wall paintings–is produced on the reservation. The five-course tasting menu, meanwhile, draws on endemic products to create dishes such as squash soup with pumpkin sprout pesto or a sweet saguaro seed macaron, served with lime-green cactus sherbet for dipping.

"What we try to do is either use Indigenous ingredients in a new way or use some worldly ingredients a bit more traditionally," explained executive chef Thomas Riordan. Servers, following oral storytelling traditions, offered context for this as my meal progressed from The Birth (light appetizers) to The Afterlife (desserts).

As my weeklong journey came to a close, I realized I'd barely scratched the surface of the Indigenous cuisines in the Southwest. But it was clear that a movement was afoot. I had an inkling it might be way back in Albuquerque, when Missy Begay (Diné), cofounder of Bow & Arrow Brewing Co.–the first Indigenous women-owned brewery in the U.S.–told me how all the hallmarks of the current culinary moment (foraging ingredients, sourcing locally, plating stories) dovetail with what her ancestors have done for eons.

"The typical American doesn't go out and find their food and put it on the dinner table," she said. "But my paternal grandmother is a Navajo botanist, so I basically grew up learning that you should be keenly aware of the plants and animals and landscape that you grew up with because it all has something to offer."

Begay has been making waves by infusing brews with grandma-approved ingredients like three-leaf sumac and Neomexicanus hops, a wild hop native to New Mexico. "For any industry to thrive, and to get better, to excel, you need to bring new perspectives to the table," she said. Across the region, home cooks, experimental brewers, and rising chefs are doing just that. They're broadening the scope of Southwestern cuisine, honoring the past to move the industry forward.

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WHERE TO STAY

TAMAYA RESORT AND SPA

Blending into the desert on the Santa Ana Pueblo, 18 miles north of Albuquerque, this Native-owned Hyatt property showcases art, textiles, and pottery from the pueblo. Plush rooms overlook the mountains, which take on an amber glow at sunset. (*Rooms from $170, hyatt.com*)

CANYON OF THE ANCIENTS GUEST RANCH

Cabins with Indigenous art make this ranch ideal for exploring the nearby archaeological sites of Hovenweep, Mesa Verde, and, of course, Canyons of the Ancients. (*Cabins from $200, canyonofthe ancients.com*)

SHERATON GRAND AT WILD HORSE PASS

This Native-owned resort 17 miles south of Phoenix is completely immersed in the Sonoran Desert. Room decor pays homage to Piipaash and Akimel O'odham heritage following a $70 million remodel in 2021. And yes, there are wild horses. (*Rooms from $211, marriott.com*)

TAKE A TOUR

ZUNI TOURISM

The largest and most traditional of the 19 pueblos located in New Mexico, Zuni has a long tradition of welcoming visitors, offering bookable experiences (such as dining with Rosanne Ghahate) that span the arts, archaeology, and gastronomy. (*zunitourism.com/tours.htm*)

EXPERIENCE HOPI TOURS

Learn the ancient art of making piki bread or take a self-guided trip along the Hopi Arts Trail to the workshops of local makers, stopping at the Hopi Cultural Center for a tsili'ongava (beef and red bean stew). (*Tours from $129, experiencehopi.com*)

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

INDIAN PUEBLO KITCHEN

This restaurant and teaching kitchen at the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center features endemic ingredients, including squashes and chiles, from the on-site Resilience Garden; many of them are grown from heirloom seeds that have been in the pueblos for hundreds of years. (*indianpueblokitchen.org*)

BOW & ARROW BREWING CO.

Shyla Sheppard and Missy Begay didn't set out to create the first brewery in the U.S. owned by Indigenous women; they wanted to bring a new perspective to craft beer, infusing their brews with ingredients like juniper berries and wild Neomexicanus hops. (*bowandarrowbrewing.com*)

COURTYARD CAFÉ

The menu at the Heard Museum's alfresco café changes by the season and might include salads with Pima wheat berries, tepary bean hummus, or prickly pear vinaigrette. (*heard.org*)

KAI

Server-storytellers take you on a culinary journey from birth to the afterlife, sharing the origins and harvesting methods of the endemic ingredients that give plates like the tribal buffalo with cholla buds and plummy saguaro blossom syrup an indelible sense of place. (*wildhorsepass.com*)

ABOVE: Shyla Sheppard (LEFT) and Missy Begay from Bow & Arrow Brewing Co. RIGHT: The Harvest Salad at Indian Pueblo Kitchen, a teaching kitchen and restaurant connected to a cultural center. BELOW: The Native-owned Hyatt property, Tamaya Resort and Spa, north of Albuquerque.

PHOTOGRAPHY: (TOP TO BOTTOM) BRANDON SODER, KYLE RM JOHNSON, COURTESY HYATT

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