

GASTRONOMY, GHOST TOWNS AND CREATIVE PIONEERS

ZOEY GOTO MEETS THE MAKERS
OF SOUTHERN ARIZONA AMONG
ITS REVITALISED COMMUNITIES
AND CACTUS-STUDDED
LANDSCAPES.

PHOTOS BY JORDAN BANKS

A

gun barrel is still smoking as I roll into the wild-west frontier town of Tombstone. Having just wrapped up their daily re-enactment show, a posse of thespian outlaws swagger past with all the bravado of John

Wayne striding off into the sunset just before the credits start rolling. They're clearly beat, having just finished a vigorous resurrection of that most famous of western showdowns: the shoot-em-up at the O.K. Corral, which actually occurred in this very spot back in 1881.

The gunslingers pass me by on Tombstone's gnarly boardwalk, lined with stores crammed with tantalising racks of ten-gallon hats and kitschy western memorabilia. Handlebar-moustachioed tour guides rattle past on stagecoaches, blaring into microphones. Neon-lit saloon bars are propped up by drinkers in fringed waistcoats and craggy cowboy boots. Wandering along the dusty main drag, it becomes increasingly hard to decipher exactly what's an authentic leftover from the Old West days and what's a Disneyfied replica – which somehow only adds to the off-beat charm of Tombstone.



PREVIOUS SPREAD:
The sun setting over giant saguaro cactus at Gates Pass, Tucson.

THIS PAGE:
A stagecoach passing through Allen Street, Tombstone.

Originally founded in 1877, and following a stint as an abandoned ghost town, Tombstone has in recent years stepped forward for a second act, this time as a spirited tourist destination attracting half a million visitors annually. The surrounding community has wholeheartedly jumped on the stampeding bandwagon, with rancher-themed motels dotting the landscape, alongside a non-denominational cowboy church and a self-assured road sign declaring 'Tombstone: The Town Too Tough to Die!'.

My pit-stop at this bullet-riddled hub is part of a broader road-trip adventure through Southern Arizona; a region where an emerging and increasingly diverse arts, crafts and culinary scene is starting to get an equal billing with time-honoured western curiosities such as Tombstone.

Just 40 miles from Tombstone, an unexpected wine-growing region has sprouted from the desert in Sonoita, becoming the first federally recognised wine-growing region in the state. Temperatures mercifully dip and the landscape becomes increasingly lush as

I journey through farming communities, past honky-tonks and empty rodeo stadiums, to reach the Dos Cabezas WineWorks, tucked by the roadside in a strip of low-rise, red-brick buildings. In this little pocket of Arizona's high desert, husband-and-wife team Todd and Kelly Bostock have been growing resilient grapes and producing game-changing wines, adding a tasting room and a restaurant that uses ingredients so rooted in the community, the local fireman doubles as the mushroom harvester.

'When I was growing up in this area, I had no idea you could actually grow wine here,' Todd confesses as we sit before a wood-burning stove on the front porch conservatory, overlooking flat plains that roll up to meet the grass-covered mountains. Small-scale, under-the-radar wine producing has been quietly happening in Sonoita since the 1980s, but in the past couple of years it's gained recognition as a destination for wine aficionados, boasting a network of around 20 wineries, many also offering restaurants, bars and accommodation opening out onto sweeping vineyards.

BELOW:
The classic façade of Long Horn Restaurant in Tombstone.

RIGHT:
Cruising through the cactus-lined backtracks of Saguaro National Park.



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'Let's be honest, you're unlikely to walk into a fancy New York restaurant and find pages of wines from Arizona,' Todd says with a wry smile, above the sound of classic country music playing in the background. 'But what you might find nowadays is a couple of choice bottles, because they're bringing something new to the conversation. We're not trying to be the new Napa Valley, but that's a good thing. Things develop slowly here. Sonoita is the kind of place where you have to work a little bit harder for your adventure.' Our conversation is frequently interrupted by an intriguing cast of local characters, including an elderly Hispanic woman selling food from the boot of her car and a radical young builder who lives in a neighbouring mud-house commune, his barefoot lifestyle recently featured in a documentary made by the switched-on clothing brand Patagonia.

Hungry for a hit of pure Americana, I surge onwards towards Bisbee, nestled into the Mule Mountains in southeast Arizona. Stickers in shop windows in this former copper-mining town declare 'I got weird in Bisbee' as rainbow flags flutter in the wind. The miners mostly downed their pickaxes and moved on about 50 years ago, after which creatives swooped in to fill the empty buildings – an eclectic mix of Gothic revival, adobe and Old-West architectural gems – with art galleries, studios and a goldmine of vintage stores.

The once flourishing mining industry is still visible today in the gaping crater at the foothills of the town, where visitors don hard hats to plunge deep beneath the earth's surface while touring the historic Queen Mine or pull over their cars to stand at fences and silently gaze down into the void. But the real treasure of Bisbee is actually tucked just around the corner in Erie Street; a road frozen in time, in all its mid-century glory.

Rusting Texaco gas pumps, abandoned Pepsi vending machines, swirling hand-painted vintage signs and an impressive collection of Chevy wagons and pickup trucks still line the street, offering a living snapshot of a bygone era. This nostalgic strip is all that's now left of Lowell, a district that was mostly demolished in the 1950s to pave way for the nearby yawning open-pit mine. In recent years the street's been preserved by a passionate cluster of local volunteers, who tape scrawled notes onto the classic cars asking visitors not to damage them. One might expect this outrageously Instagrammable location to be in the midst





*So deserted is Erie Street
that you half expect
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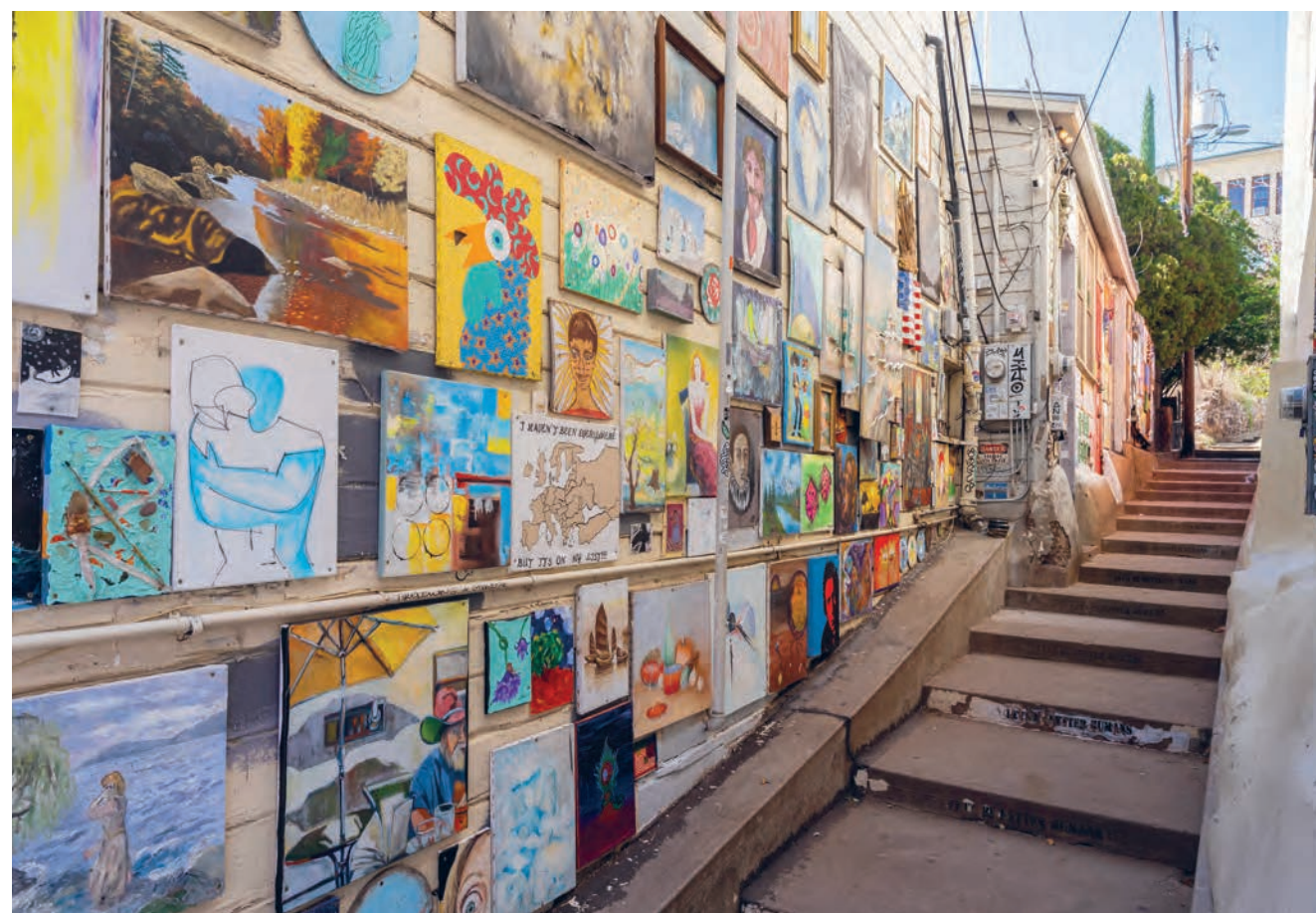
of an online renaissance, but apparently the influencers have yet to receive the memo. So deserted is Erie Street that you half expect tumbleweed to roll past its boarded-up movie theatre.

Nowadays, the shopfronts are mostly facades, save for an art gallery, junk shop and the Bisbee Breakfast Club; an atmospheric diner serving up heavenly stacks of toppling buttermilk pancakes oozing with syrup, Elvis serenading over the crackling speakers, as longstanding staff give strong pours on the weak coffee.

Refuelled, the bright lights of Southern Arizona's largest city, Tucson, are calling. Heading southwest through the Sonoran Desert, the landscape is punctuated with volcanic mountains and saguaro cactus shaped like candelabras. I pull the car over for a rest stop at Tubac, a border-town arts community where a provocative store emblazoned with 'Build the wall' signs stands cheek by jowl with galleries showcasing local creatives, many of Mexican heritage. Within a stone's throw of verdant golf courses where the Rat Pack once teed up, the nearby mom-and-pop restaurant serves up a satisfying dish of fiery *huevos rancheros*.

Arriving into the outspoken university town of Tucson, I'm now 70 miles from the Mexican border. But it's never far from the conversation, as I discover with a visit to craft-beer company Borderlands Brewing Company. Surrounded by vast churning silver vats, the air thick with the hoppy aroma of fermenting beer, I'm greeted at the entrance of the small-scale corrugated barn by female head brewer and director of production Ayla Kapahi.

On a mission to prove that good beer



PREVIOUS PAGE
FROM THE TOP:
Colourful shopfronts on
Bisbee's Main Street; Thrift
store on Main Street,
Bisbee; Bartender at St
Elmo Bar in Bisbee.

CLOCKWISE FROM
TOP LEFT:
Cinema and classic cars
along Erie Street, Bisbee;
Classic storefronts and
cars on Erie Street, Bisbee;
Tucson-based street artist
Jessica Gonzalez at work;
Local artwork on the
streets of Bisbee.



ABOVE:
Artist Santos Barbosa at his Big Horn Gallery exhibition.



RIGHT:
Mission San Xavier del Bac, Tucson.



THIS PAGE:
Don Guerra, founder of
Barrio Bread in Tucson.

OPPOSITE:
Ayila Kapahi, founder and
owner of Borderlands
Brewing Company.



knows no boundaries, Kapahi co-founded the Las Hermanas project in 2019, which translates as 'the sisters' in Spanish, as a way for Hispanic female brewers to collaborate, share knowledge and blur boundaries. The exchange includes a special edition IPA brewed collaboratively by 40 women living on either side of the border. Kapahi, whose mother is Mexican, explains: 'We're identified as a border region here and source a lot of inspiration from the Sonoran Desert, shared by both the US and Mexico. Nowadays, we can't ignore what's happening at the border and its impact on craft and trade on either side.'

With eight years of professional brewing now under her belt, Kapahi fondly recalls the

early days when she'd watch YouTube tutorials to learn the mechanics of home-brewing. Since then, she's seen a small but significant shift in the male-dominated world of craft brewing in Southern Arizona, proudly adding that, for the past four years, Borderlands Brewing Company has been brewed exclusively by females. 'I'm part of a rising number of women in the industry,' Kapahi tells me, black rubber boots squeaking on the sticky floor as we pad through the micro-brewery. 'When I started out, there was only one other woman commercially producing in Southern Arizona. Today, there's around seven of us in Tucson alone.'

Tucson may have been put on the foodie map in 2005, when it was crowned

THIS PAGE:
Climbers on Mount
Lemmon, Tucson.



the Unesco City of Gastronomy, but it's an accolade that's actually been 4,000 years in the making, through its unique blend of Native American, colonial Spanish and border Mexican influenced cuisine. Hyper-local ingredients from the city and the land along the Santa Cruz River have long been a part of the region's culinary story, with cactus, prickly pear, desert honey and hardy tepary beans, scattered from the sky according to local folklore, livening up local pantries. Today, the city's mural-clad streets are home to some of the most exciting restaurants in the state, from upscale bistros such as Tito and Pep and the seafood-focused Coronet, housed around an elegant courtyard strung with lights, to street carts serving Sonoran hot dogs; a supersized version of pigs in blankets, topped with spicy pinto beans and dripping in punchy jalapeño salsa.

Tucson's recent gastronomic renaissance is partly thanks to Don Guerra, a baker whose name has been repeated with reverence for years. Guerra has now gained local celebrity status, having won the 2022 James Beard Outstanding Baker award, swiftly putting his low-key neighbourhood bakery, housed in a 1960s shopping mall, on the global stage.

For my final stop, I make an early morning call at Guerra's Barrio Bread, where the compact bakery is already a hive of bustling activity, the first bleary-eyed baker having arrived three hours before me. Cutting a calming figure against a frenetic backdrop of workers methodically sifting, kneading and stacking rustic loaves, Guerra describes how he's spearheaded the local heritage grain movement. 'White Sonora wheat had actually been growing here since the 1690s, brought over by Spanish missionaries such as Father Kino. But by the 1950s it had pretty much disappeared,' he says. Following successful seed-saver experiments, the heirloom variety grains are now grown, harvested and milled, all within a short distance of Guerra's toasty ovens. Warm loaves of Barrio Bread are served at the best culinary spots across town, from the starched tablecloths of fine-dining establishments to family-run *tamale* joints and community food-share programmes.

'The scene in Tucson is very much about the preservation of food culture, agricultural stimulation and the sharing of knowledge,' Guerra says as the heady scent of freshly baked bread wafts out to the sidewalk, where, in an hour or so, locals will start to form an orderly queue for their daily loaf, stamped with a distinctive flour stencil of a saguaro.

'I feel that I'm part of a bigger story that's currently happening in the city,' Guerra says, looking out of the window as the sun rises over the cactus-lined street in front of his small but mighty bakery. 'It's the revitalisation of what's always been here in Tucson, but is now finally getting its moment in the spotlight.'

NEED TO KNOW

GETTING THERE

International flights arrive into Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport; it's a 90-minute drive from Phoenix to Tucson.

BEST TIME TO GO

Spring and autumn are the perfect times to visit, with blue skies and light jacket temperatures. In winter, thermometers hover in the early twenties, attracting snowbirds hoping to thaw. The summer season can be blisteringly warm, although smoking hot hotel deals reward the brave.

CURRENCY US dollar

TIME ZONE GMT -7

FOOD

Tucson's food scene is buzzing, offering endless new takes on border-town-fusion favourites. Start the day right with a health-conscious brunch at Five Points Market. The Monica offers relaxed, lunchtime patio dining, while Maynards serves boundary-pushing dishes.

WHERE TO STAY

In Tuscon, try the Downtown Clifton Hotel, or Loews Ventana Canyon Resort in the hills. A good option in Tubac is Tubac Golf Resort.

HOW TO DO IT

A road trip is easy to arrange independently and gives you the freedom to really explore.

MUST-PACK ITEM

An embroidered western shirt and cowboy boots. Boot Barn in Tucson has an impressive range, should your existing wardrobe be lacking.

WHY GO

Southern Arizona is currently having a moment as its creative and culinary scenes gain recognition. A road trip offers a satisfying mix of Old West attractions and Mexican culture, blended with forward-looking artists and chefs revitalising this characterful region.