

Mexican dishes are a specialty of many restaurants in the American Southwest, like the beef tacos pictured here; a cowboy grills T-bone steaks Southwest style (opposite).



Taco photo courtesy of the Austin Convention and Visitors Bureau; other photo courtesy of the Scottsdale Convention and Visitors Bureau

TASTES OF THE SOUTHWEST



From Frito pie and green corn tamales to chili cookoffs and prickly pear margaritas

by Libby Boren McMillan

In kitchens across west Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona, menus revolve around ancient traditions and Wild West ingenuity, as well as area crops, Mother Nature, and the queen of all Southwestern ingredients, the chile. America's great Southwest was born of many cultures, and a meal there reflects the diverse influences (and languages) of Native Americans, Mexicans, Spanish explorers, and herds of cowboys, all of whom played vital roles in defining and redefining what is perhaps the most unique part of the United States.

While Texas takes its culinary cues from the cowboy, neighboring Mexico, and some honest-to-goodness "Chili Queens," Arizona menus are often inspired by both desert and mountains, an abundance of locally grown produce, and nearby California. New Mexican food is a genre all its own, neither Tex-Mex nor Mexican, but a slowly evolved fusion of Native American recipes, regional ingredients, and south-of-the-border traditions. And even though "the South" extends farther west than most imagine, we'll save a look at chicken-fried steak, cheese grits, and fried okra for another time, although Southern food is a given in Texas and widely available in New Mexico.

Paramount to any discussion of Southwestern food is the distinction between chile and chili. The chile with an "e" family includes several varieties of peppers, some of which are spicy. Domesticated ten thousand years ago in South America and Mexico, the iconic chile was originally hot but was eventually bred to be flavorful as well. Chiles are most often roasted, skinned, seeded, and made into sauces that can enhance a number of dishes.

Chili with an "i" is the spicy meat-based soup of dubious origin that has spawned legendary claims and challenges. It transforms lowly wieners into beloved chili dogs, while a bag of corn chips dressed in chili, cheese, and onions



achieves high pop culture status as the aptly named Frito pie.

The tales of how chili was created are as varied as its ingredients from cook to cook. In 1976, a full-blooded Ute Indian named Rudy Valdez won the International Chili Society's World's Championship Chili Cookoff and claimed that his recipe was two thousand years old. That gives the term "family recipe" new meaning!

During the nineteenth century, soldiers in San Antonio ponied up their spare change to purchase "chili con carne" on the Military Plaza. Entrepreneurial Mexican señoritas dubbed "Chili Queens" prepared the meaty fare at home, then sold it from vendor carts on the plaza. Their spicy temptation, kept warm by mesquite fires, was an instant hit, and its popularity spread quickly. The Chicago World's Fair in 1893 even had a San Antonio chili stand. The Chili Queens were finally put out of business in the 1930s, but their claim to fame was firmly established as a Southwestern staple.

Each November, the fieriest of all competitors pack up spices and pots and head out for the tiny west Texas burg of Terlingua, which hosts the Terlingua International Chili Championship, considered the granddaddy of all chili cookoffs. This epic event, attended by thousands each year, merits its own annual proclamation from the Texas governor. And in 1977, the Texas legislature designated chili as the official state dish. Chili is not a casual subject in Texas!

By the same token, "cuisine" is not a word bandied about much in the Lone Star State. While elegant, upscale meals can certainly be had, a true



everyday life. Thanksgiving Day tamales are a tradition even in non-Hispanic homes. Salsa is served with everything, even meatloaf. And breakfast often starts the day on a Mexican note, with steaming plates of *migas* or *huevos rancheros* (sometimes called the “morning after” dish).

As for lunch and dinner, a meal in the Lone Star State can be Tex-Mex (modern-day concoctions including nachos and fajitas) or more exotic “interior” or “regional” Mexican cuisine, such as enchiladas at historic Fonda San Miguel in Austin, which come smothered with a rich mole sauce of ancho chiles, spices, and dark chocolate. The menu at this inspiring restaurant offers a tempting blend of Wild West, Southwest, and regional Mexican dishes. Diners can start with an appetizer of Veracruzano ceviche, then move on to Carne Asada a la Tampiqueña (grilled strips of beef) served with guacamole, grilled chile poblano, and a cheese enchilada or the Ribeye Caballero, a “cowboy cut” sixteen-to-eighteen-ounce steak served with Chile de Arbol chimichurri (a traditional Argentine sauce of herbs and vinegar, where the heat factor is punched way up in this case).

While used with abandon in Texas and Arizona cooking, chiles are to New Mexico what the orange is to Florida. The state legislature actually voted to make “Red or Green?” the state question, referring to the sauce-of-choice query that accompanies any order in any New Mexican restaurant. The prevalence of chile in New Mexican cooking is often shocking to visitors; there’s hardly a restaurant within two hundred



miles of Albuquerque that doesn’t have a green chile cheeseburger on the menu. Roadside stands sell red and green chile beef jerky.

Red chiles can often be hotter than green, but the reverse can also be true. It just depends on the day and the batch. Trust your waiter to know the difference, or just order “Christmas on the side” and experiment. The green chile family includes the jalapeño, long mild, and long hot. Red chiles include paprika, cayenne, long mild, and long hot. There are also poblanos, serranos, and pasillas. Roasted poblanos are anchos; roasted jalapeños are chipotle.

The tiny town of Hatch, New Mexico, is considered the chile capital of the western world. During Labor Day weekend, thirty thousand “chile heads” converge here to celebrate the most important ingredient in New Mexican fare. The Hatch Valley Chile Festival has cookoffs, a parade, and the crowning of an annual chile queen; many festival-goers sport red chile-dyed T-shirts.

Hatch’s famous crop is available by the bushel at vendor stands all over the

Texan might tell you that the holy grail is covered in barbecue sauce. Foodies often agree that Texas serves up the best barbecue on the planet. The towns of Llano, Luling, and Lockhart are all worth a visit for diehard ‘cue fans, but city folk in Dallas, Fort Worth, Austin, and San Antonio can also put on a bib and get down to business.

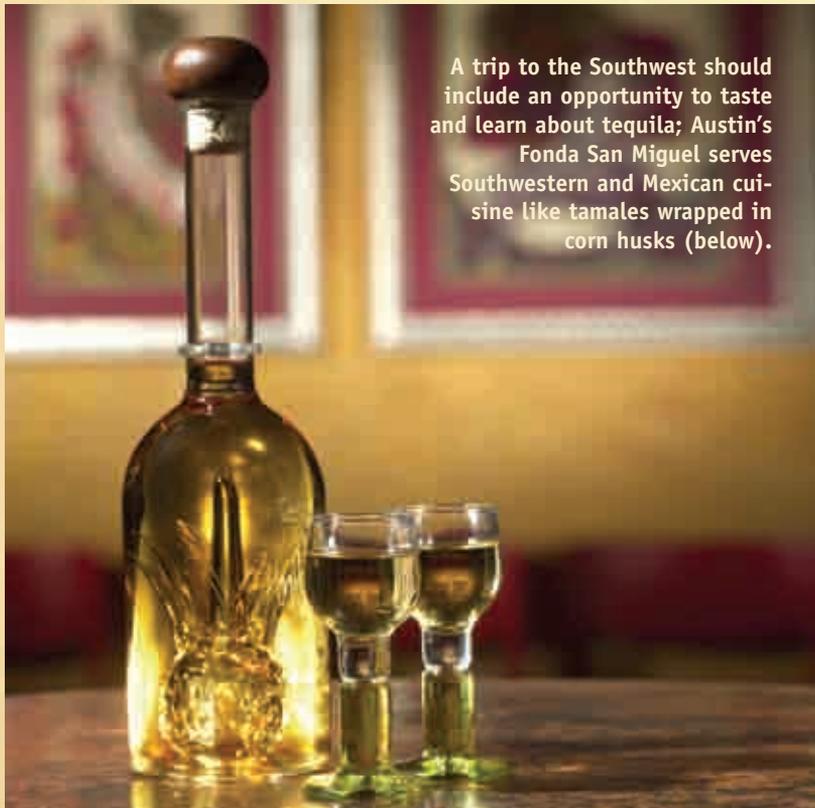
Sizzling platters heaped with big, beautiful steaks also rate highly on the sacred Texas chow list. A Lone Star twist substitutes onion rings for baked potato. The beverage of choice for boot-wearing steak lovers? Ice-cold beer or salt-rimmed margaritas. Vegetarians trapped in Texas will often be surrounded by boisterous carnivores; they’d be advised to head straight for one of the state’s legendary Mexican restaurants.

Mexican food is to Texas what seafood is to Florida, simply a part of



Chile peppers are used extensively by cooks in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona; according to its owners, Black’s BBQ in Lockhart is the oldest family-owned barbecue restaurant in Texas (above).

Black’s BBQ photo by Drew Holmgreen



A trip to the Southwest should include an opportunity to taste and learn about tequila; Austin's Fonda San Miguel serves Southwestern and Mexican cuisine like tamales wrapped in corn husks (below).

Recipe for Green Chile Chicken Stew

From El Pinto restaurant, Albuquerque, New Mexico

Ingredients

1 pound chicken tenders or chicken breast meat cut into one-quarter-inch pieces
 1 quart chicken broth
 3 cups medium-size red potatoes cut into one-half-inch cubes
 1 16-ounce jar of El Pinto medium green chile sauce (available online at www.elpinto.com)
 1 tbsp. vegetable oil
 1 1/2 cups whole kernel corn
 1/4 cup all purpose flour
 1 tbsp. granulated garlic
 Salt and pepper to taste

Directions

Pre-cook potatoes in boiling water for ten minutes, then cool. Heat oil in one-gallon pot or larger. Add chicken and stir until completely cooked. Add flour and stir well. Add chicken broth and stir well. Bring to a boil. Add garlic, corn, green chile sauce, and potatoes. Reduce heat and simmer for five minutes. Salt and pepper to taste. Makes eight servings.

state during harvest season. Most people prefer to eat or freeze their roasted chiles, but fresh chile powder is also a pantry "must," and each region's crop has its own flavor. In sacred Chimayo (the North American version of Lourdes, near Santa Fe), there's a gift shop overflowing with small bags of fresh ground chile powder from the region. The shop is worth a visit if only for its aroma.

Northern New Mexico has a few vineyards, but this fertile mountainous region is also blessed with many beautiful orchards in its high valleys. Ancient waterways, called *acequias*, bring melted snow from the Sangre de Cristo Mountains to fruits and herbs growing below. Cibolo Junction, a company found on the high road to Taos, offers distinctly flavored jams and preserves, including jalapeño raspberry and red chile mango. Stop by La Carreta in tiny Dixon for green chile lemon marmalade.

Native Americans throughout the American Southwest used corn (maize) that today still comes in a variety of colors. The Pueblo tribes are said to have favored the blue corn, and today it's easy to find blue-corn products made from blue cornmeal, including pancakes, muffins, tortillas, and tortilla chips. Cibolo Junction blue corn bread mixes also include a touch of jalapeño and lime.

While in New Mexico, do take advantage of the extraordinary range of tequilas found in great restaurants. Forget that one crazy night in college; it's time to move on. Good tequilas can be sipped and enjoyed without a backlash. A great place for an education is local hangout Maria's in Santa Fe or La Posta in the historic southern town of Mesilla. Each has dozens of wonderful tequilas and mescals for tasting and learning. You'll also find that the Southwestern love affair with this misunderstood beverage manifests itself in great entrées, such as quail braised in tequila.

The Sonoran Desert often inspires the chefs of Arizona. Don't be surprised if you see a bright purple cocktail in the Grand Canyon State; that would be the prickly pear margarita, made from the fruit of a prominent



Recommended Restaurants

Albuquerque, New Mexico

For enchiladas: Barelás Coffee House, 505-843-7577
For red chile: Durán's Central Pharmacy, 505-247-4141
For green chile: El Pinto, 505-898-1771, www.elpinto.com/restaurant
For breakfast burritos: Frontier Restaurant, 505-266-0550, www.frontierrestaurant.com
For New Mexican cuisine: Sadie's Cocinita, 505-345-5339

Austin, Texas

For barbecue: The Salt Lick, 512-858-4959, www.saltlickbbq.com
For chili: Texas Chili Parlor, 512-472-2828, www.cactushill.com/tcp/home.htm
For Mexican cuisine: Fonda San Miguel, 512-459-4121, www.fondasanmiguel.com
For steak: Austin Land and Cattle Company, 512-472-1813, www.austinlandandcattlecompany.com

Dallas, Texas

For barbecue: Sonny Bryan's Smokehouse, multiple locations, www.sonnybryans.com
For Mexican cuisine: Mario's Chiquita, 972-423-2977, www.mariosmexicanuisine.com
For steak: The Butcher Shop, 214-720-1032, www.thebutchershop.com; Hoffbrau Steaks, 214-742-4663, www.hoffbrausteaks.com

Fort Worth, Texas

For Mexican cuisine: Juanita's, 817-335-1777
For Tex-Mex cuisine: Joe T. Garcia's, 817-626-4356, www.joets.com

Houston, Texas

For barbecue: Thelma's Bar-B-Que, 713-228-2262

Llano, Texas

For barbecue: Cooper's Old Time Pit Bar-B-Que, 325-247-5713, www.coopersbbq.com

Lockhart, Texas

For barbecue: Black's BBQ, 512-398-2712, www.blacksbbq.com; Kreuz Market, 512-398-2361, www.kreuzmarket.com; Smitty's Market, 512-398-9344, www.smittysmarket.com

Luling, Texas

For barbecue: Luling City Market, 877-526-2271, www.lulingcitymarket.com

San Antonio, Texas

For barbecue: Bar-B-Q Patio, 210-622-0660

Santa Fe, New Mexico

For Mexican cuisine and tequila: Maria's New Mexican Kitchen, 505-983-7929, www.marias-santafe.com
For cocktails: Señor Lucky's at the Palace, 505-982-9891, www.senorluckys.com
For Frito pie: Five and Dime General Store, 505-992-1800

Scottsdale, Arizona

For new Southwestern cuisine: Lon's at the hermosa, 602-955-7878, www.lons.com

Tucson, Arizona

For green corn tamales: Lerua's Fine Mexican Food, 520-624-0322
For green corn tamales and *carne seca*: El Charro Café, 520-622-1922, www.elcharrocafe.com

cactus. (The fruits can be peeled and eaten like a kiwi or pureed for drinks, syrups, and sauces.) Lon's at the hermosa in Scottsdale infuses its organic menu with several desert-inspired entrées, such as prickly pear-lacquered breast of duck paired with roasted poblano chile rellenos. The pads of the prickly pear can also be eaten—they're best when grilled—and are called *nopales* or *nopalitos*. Even desert bees contribute to Arizona's unique offerings. The Cowboy Honey Company works with its winged allies to create artisan honeys, including camel thorn, cats-claw, mesquite, citrus, and desert wildflower.

Unique to Tucson is the sweet, addictive green corn tamale. Handmade from masa (or corn dough) and wrapped in corn husks, green corn tamales are worthy of the FedEx charges many incur to receive them from Lerua's Fine Mexican Food. Historic El Charro in downtown Tucson serves green corn tamales and also many traditional dishes incorporating its famous *carne seca* (dried beef). No need to wonder from where the main ingredient comes; sides of beef are air-dried in suspended cages just outside the restaurant.

Arizona is also one of only four U.S. states that grow citrus. Cooks and chefs embrace the challenge of using southern county lemons, tangerines, oranges, and grapefruit in their dishes or as the perfect complement to spicy food. Visitors to the cooler mountainous region of the north will discover entrées that reflect life at a higher altitude, such as pan-fried trout, grilled salmon, or "fruit of the forest" pie.

While diners in the metro Phoenix/Scottsdale area can find any type of food imaginable, the state has its own tasty regional flavors. Besides the prickly pear, these include the amaranth plant (used for its seeds and to make nutty-tasting flour), chiles, pumpkin seeds (called *pepitas*), quinoa cereal grain, and the Native American staples of beans, squash, and corn. Squash blossoms are often dipped in batter then fried or sautéed, but they also make edible garnishes. The unique Chayote squash looks like a wrinkled Bartlett pear and tastes like both cucumber and squash; salads benefit from its crunchy texture. Yuma County in Arizona's southwestern corner grows a preponderance of winter vegetables (ninety percent of those sold in North America, in fact), but you won't find broccoli, cauliflower, kale, and carrots featured on many menus, except perhaps at the Scottsdale Culinary Institute.

If organic foods appeal, head for the Boulders, the first all-organic resort in the United States. With organic menus and cooking classes already available, the Boulders is adding large-scale gardens on its grounds to produce ingredients for the kitchens. An all-natural farm-

ers' market is already in place at the El Pedregal, the resort's festival marketplace, featuring fresh produce. Guests may purchase fruits and vegetables and present them to a resort chef that night for inclusion in the evening meal.

Any of the Scottsdale-area resorts, however, will tempt with creative regionally inspired entrées like pan-seared, sugar-cured ostrich, guajillo-charred lamb loin, margarita shrimp, or grilled baby back ribs with Fat Tire Ale barbecue sauce. Chef Robert McGrath proves that James Beard and Zagat award winners aren't always stuffy at his Roaring Fork restaurant via entrées like beef tenderloin with a whisky shellac served with green chile macaroni.

If your mouth isn't watering by now, check your pulse. If, however, you suddenly find yourself craving something spicy, book a flight heading toward the sunset. You, too, can discover the American Southwest...one plate at a time. 🍴

Having been raised by a Texan mom who spiced up many family meals with salsa, Libby Boren McMillan now gets her required Southwestern fix by regular visits to Albuquerque, New Mexico, where her parents and sister reside. She believes that until a trip out west makes it onto the calendar, a dozen of Lerua's green corn tamales are the next best thing and well worth the FedEx charge from Tucson.



In the Albuquerque area, you can find green chile cheeseburgers at almost any restaurant.



Festivals and Events

Celebrating Southwestern Cuisine

Jalapeño Festival
Part of the Washington's Birthday Celebration, a longtime Laredo event that attracts some four hundred thousand attendees each year
When: February
Where: Laredo, Texas
For more info: www.wbcalaredo.org

National Fiery Foods and Barbeque Show
Featuring the largest collection of hot and spicy products ever assembled in the United States, plus cooking demonstrations
When: March
Where: Albuquerque, New Mexico
For more info: www.fiery-foods.com/ffshow

Hatch Valley Chile Festival
Annual event in the "chile capital of the world" featuring a parade, contests, and crowning of a chile queen
When: Labor Day Weekend
Where: Hatch, New Mexico
For more info: www.hatchchilefest.com

Santa Fe Wine & Chile Fiesta
Annual event with seminars, cooking demonstrations, and tastings
When: September
Where: Santa Fe, New Mexico
For more info: www.santafewineandchile.org

International Chili Society's World's Championship Chili Cookoff
Featuring the winners of ICS-sanctioned chili cookoffs around the country
When: October
Where: Location varies
For more info: www.chilicookoff.com

Terlingua International Chili Championship
Considered the granddaddy of chili cookoffs
When: First Saturday of November
Where: Terlingua, Texas, near Big Bend
For more info: www.chili.org/terlingua.html