

{ MUSIC STARTS }

Andi: [00:01:32] Sonoran sushi and Mexican sushi as a whole is a little more fun. It's a little more glitzy. [00:01:40][8.5]

KAILA: You heard that right, Sonoran Sushi. What is it? And how did it come about? That's what intrigued one listener to ask us to dive into its history. What does a fusion between traditional Japanese sushi and Mexican food create?

KAILA: Here's a quick explanation of the elements that make up traditional Japanese Sushi from The Arizona Republic's food expert, Andi Berlin. She joined our dining team just a few months ago but has spent the last 10 years reporting on the Tucson food scene.

Andi: [00:01:13] so Sonoran sushi is it's a completely different ballgame than traditional Japanese sushi. And I think that, you know, traditional Japanese sushi is focused on technique. It's focused on simplicity. It's focused on purity of ingredients. [00:01:30][17.0]

KAILA: Traditional Japanese sushi's main ingredient is vinegared rice. You'll find that Sonoran sushi rolls have those base ingredients like rice and seaweed but then have their own twist.

{SHOW MUSIC STARTS}

Andi: [00:01:42] it's it could be fried. It can be fun. It can be sweet. It can be spicy. It has that Sonoran Mexican esthetic to it. [00:01:52][10.3]

{MUSIC BREAK}

KAILA: WELCOME TO VALLEY 101, A PODCAST FROM *THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC* AND *AZCENTRAL.COM* WHERE *WE ANSWER THE QUESTIONS YOU ASK ABOUT METRO PHOENIX*. I'm your host, Kaila White.

KAILA: We'll break down today's episode in three parts. First, we're taking a trip down to Puerto Peñasco, commonly known to Arizonans as Rocky Point, to check out a local Sushi restaurant. Then Andi will rejoin us to give a sense of how Tucson and Southern Arizona has made itself known for its Mexican Sushi.

KAILA: And finally, you'll hear from a local Valley restaurant owner who was one of the first to introduce this food trend to metro Phoenix. Maritza, take us to Puerto Peñasco.

(OUT CUE MUSIC)

Maritza: Puerto Peñasco is often dubbed as Arizona's beach town. Just four hours from Phoenix, you'll find a small town that in the last few decades has grown, attracting tourists from Mexico and The United States alike.

Every trip I make to the beach town I'm always surprised by a new business or restaurant. For the last 23 years, there's one restaurant on the popular Calle 13 street that has prospered... Sushi Sun. I met up with Rodolfo Valdez, a chef at Sushi Sun. I asked him to break down how Sonoran Sushi got its start. We spoke in Spanish but don't worry I'll translate.

Rodolfo: [00:06:58] En Sinaloa se hicieron las las combinaciones más variadas y ahora en toda la República hay diferentes rollos fusionados con la cocina endémica de cada lugar [00:07:08][9.4]

While the Mexican/Japanese fusion is often called Sonoran Sushi... it officially got its start in another Mexican state, Sinaloa.

Rodolfo said that is where they created the most variations of rolls and from there it spread out throughout the country. The majority of Sinaloa has a coast line and a lot of their traditional recipes include seafood.

Rodolfo: [00:07:45] Y en Sinaloa, pues sus mariscos allá son rojos como de agua. Chile. Que es lo que ellos consumen más. [00:07:52][6.6]

Rodolfo said in Sinaloa they are known for their shrimp. So you'll find many shrimp based rolls including in the style of Aguachile.

So how long Mexican sushi has been around?

Rodolfo: [00:08:35] aquí en México, que fue el boom del Sushi, tendrán como unos 15 años. [00:08:40][5.0]

~~He said~~ it's been about 15 years since the boom of Sushi took hold in Mexico. Each state in Mexico has their own style for making sushi rolls. So I asked Rodolfo what ingredients make Sonoran sushi rolls?

Rodolfo: [00:07:37] en Sonora. La carne hace que nuestros rollos de mar y tierra, de arrechera, de carne, de res sean los que sobresalen [00:07:47][9.2]

He said it's the beef from Sonora that makes their rolls stick out and is what tends to be the main ingredient. And you see that on their menu. There's the mar y tierra roll which has beef, shrimp, cream cheese and avocado. Which is then breaded and fried.

They've also got sweet rolls like their mango roll. It has coconut breaded shrimp with cucumber and avocado covered with cream cheese and a mango dressing.

You'll find 36 different rolls on their menu.

But they also make traditional sushi with raw fish. The proximity to the ocean ensures that their fish is always fresh.

Rodolfo: [00:11:00] todos los días tengo camarón fresco aquí en la mesa. La pesca del día [00:11:06][5.2]

He said every day he has fresh shrimp and fresh fish. Rodolfo takes pride in picking out the fresh ingredients. He loves the ability to ensure the food he serves to his customers is of the highest quality. He also enjoys bringing a small town like Puerto Peñasco new and modern foods.

While I was there I got a taste of what Sushi Sun had to offer. I had a basic California roll: crab, avocado and cucumbers wrapped in seaweed and rice. The twist comes with how you eat it. Usually you eat it with soy sauce, ginger and wasabi.

Not at Sushi Sun. They have their own house soy sauce.

Rodolfo: [00:00:09] tiene el pepino, zanahoria, chilito, cebollín y la salsa es hoy especial. [00:00:18][8.9]

It has carrots, cucumbers, chives, and chili pepper in it. So here's how you eat it.

You drizzle the house soy sauce on top with the vegetables, add a slice of vinegared jalapeño then you sprinkle lime juice and top off with a chipotle mayo.

Rodolfo: [00:01:28] ya le pusiste el toque sonorenses [00:01:28][0.8]

He said now you've added that Sonora touch. It created a fresh spicy taste with a bit of a crunch. This way to eat a California roll is very customizable. If you don't like spicy food skip the jalapeño or if you don't like the bitterness from the lime you pass on that too.

(Cue Music)

So just a quick recap, Mexican Sushi took Mexico by storm roughly 15 years ago. Some of the main elements you'll find in a Mexican Sushi roll are beef, cream cheese and the breading.

So that's how Sonoran Sushi is done in Sonora. Now let's take a trip to Tucson.... Kinda of. I sat down with Andi Berlin who you heard from at the top of the episode. She looked into this trend when she reported out of Tucson - and one thing Andi noted was there weren't many brick and mortar Sonoran sushi restaurants around. And that's because of this...

Andi: [00:03:04] I think that Tucson has a huge food truck culture, a lot more so than Phoenix and probably anywhere else in Arizona, especially on the south side of Tucson around South 12th Avenue, which has a huge Latino/Latina population. A lot of people that are directly from Sonora live down there. [00:03:27][23.2]

Andi: [00:03:42] And I think that Sonoran Sushi has become more popular over the last few years down in Tucson. And so people started realizing, I can have my own truck, [00:03:55][13.2]

It's cheaper and easier to manage a food truck than to have to rent out a whole building. Andi also noticed that a lot of these trucks park in interesting locations around Tucson.

Andi: [00:04:02] I went to one on Ajo that was right next to a tire shop. And people are, you know, there's like a car, like there's car shops and tire shops and then a person serving sushi and it's basically like fried carne asada in sushi. [00:04:21][19.1]

That truck had a large takeout customer base. And on the day Andi was there, there was an hour wait for the takeout boxes of sushi. There are tons of food trucks all specializing in their own unique rolls. There was one specifically that she recommends people check out because it had such a peculiar menu item.

Andi: [00:11:27] so there are a lot, but one of my favorites is this food truck on 12th Avenue. It's called El Souci, El Sushi de Papà. And they serve this creation that I've never seen before. It's like a deep fried sushi dome. So it's not a roll, it's like a dome of sushi, and then you cut it in four pieces and they're like, you know, these pieces of like a dome. And inside is cream cheese, rice, carne asada chicken, I believe. And then it's topped with crab salad [00:12:11][43.3]

[Mexico and Sonora have well over a century long history with Asian immigrants.](#) It's perhaps why Mexicans have embraced Asian cuisine in the way they have. Andi said that there are sushi restaurants in nearly all Sonoran cities like Hermosillo, Nogales, and of course Puerto Peñasco. Tucson's connection with Sonora is one of the main reasons why we see a Mexican Sushi scene there.

Andi: [00:13:35] if you want to know what Sonoran food is go down to South 12th Avenue and do a taco tour or do a Sonoran sushi tour and just learn about the cuisine of the state that's just below us, our neighbor Sonora. [00:13:53][18.0]

(Transition music)

Now if you're not planning a trip to Puerto Peñasco or Tucson any time soon there are Mexican sushi spots you can try closer to home. Take Senor Sushi in Phoenix. It has three locations including one on 43th ave and Indian School Road. That's where I met up with Eduardo Gonzalez, the owner of the restaurant. I asked him how he discovered Mexican sushi.

Lalo: [00:01:25] was a little bit over 10 years ago in Hermosillo. Believe it or not, I was surprised. And what triggered my idea of trying to look more into Senor Sushi? It was we eat tacos in there. We'll see you in one corner. And two weeks, three weeks later, we went back and they were actually selling sushi in the same taco stand. So that's what triggered my interest in finding out more about it. [00:01:59][33.3]

He started to do more research on the food trend and realized he could be one of the first to bring it to the Valley.

Lalo: [00:03:53] you know, it had not hit the United States. And I searched all over the country in the big cities like L.A., Chicago, and I didn't see anything like it. So I came back and started working on developing our own original recipes on on dishes. And that's how we started working on that. [00:04:18][24.2]

He hired a traditional sushi chef in the states and a sushi chef from Sinaloa to come up with their own menu. One distinguishing element was that he uses panko breadcrumbs rather than regular breadcrumbs. He said panko absorbs less oil giving it a lighter and crunchier taste to the fried rolls. I asked him what was the most popular dish on his menu.

Lalo: [00:06:27] We got two that are the most popular ones, which is the one with chilito and Carne Asada Roll. [00:06:33][5.6]

Maritza: [00:06:34] Can you explain to me what you find in those?
[00:06:37][2.8]

Lalo: [00:06:38] The one with chilito is shrimp tempura inside with crab meat and then it's got shrimp cooked shrimp on top with some.
[00:06:51][12.7]

Lalo: [00:06:57] Cream cheese, and then it's deep fried with panko breading and then stop with orange sauce in your sauce
[00:07:07][10.3]

Maritza: [00:07:09] and the other one with the carne asada.
[00:07:10][1.2]

Lalo: [00:07:10] And the carne asada, is your typical carne asada will use really good meat, would do the Carnicero and it's got

tomatoes. It's got a little bit of cilantro, it's got a jalapeno. And again, it's to deep fried with, panko breading and to put orange and eel sauce. [00:07:30][20.0]

[52.9]

Not only have they introduced this style of Sushi to the Latino community here in Arizona but they also began serving traditional sushi. Eduardo has used his restaurant as a place for his customers to try new foods.

Lalo: [00:09:31] And it's interesting because I tell people a little bit at a time, we're going to introduce that to the Latino community. When we first opened, we used to buy two filets of different kinds of fish because, you know, that was not something that they would typically keep order right now. So the last four or five years, we order between 40 and 60. So you see the Mexican community kind of experiencing the raw sushi. So it's very interesting. And I think to be able to introduce that to the Latino community. [00:10:10][38.9]

He's had friends who said they'd never eat raw fish. After some convincing on Eduardo's part they've since converted.

Lalo: [00:26:32] And then all of a sudden, you see, them eating a raw sushi salad, you know, which they five years ago, they say that would've never tried [00:26:42][10.2]

Ten years ago, Señor Sushi and Eduardo introduced Mexican sushi to the Valley. Moving forward, he plans on expanding his menu and exposing the Hispanic community to other traditional Japanese food. The conversation behind Mexican sushi has been controversial at times with other critics hoping the trend doesn't stick. For Eduardo, it's here to stay,

Lalo: [00:34:35] think that the ultimate decision is our customers and our customers that keep coming and we keep getting new customers. [00:34:43][8.2]

Lalo: [00:35:45] it's been interesting to see how the sushi fusion has developed in in the Arizona community. [00:35:53][7.3]

(CUE SHOW MUSIC)

Maritza: So Kaila, that's how Mexican Sushi has taken hold in Mexico and Arizona. Have you ever had this Mexican/Japanese fusion and would you be willing to try it?

Kaila: You know.... TKTK

Kaila: Thanks so much for diving into this food trend for us Maritza. Also listeners, if you're interested in following Andi Berlin's work with the Republic's dining team make sure to follow her on Twitter @a-n-d-i Berlin.

Kaila: If you've got more food related questions make sure to submit them to our team at valley 101 dot azcentral dot com. And if you're a regular listener of our show, please consider supporting it by subscribing to azcentral dot com.

Kaila: And as always, thank you for listening to Valley 101, a podcast from *The Arizona Republic* and azcentral.com. Also if you're a fan of Arizona politics, be sure to check out The Gaggle...our sister podcast that breaks down local issues and helps you keep up with the state's political news.

Kaila: See you next week.