

Who has the best Mexican food? Phoenix or Tucson?

Kaely Monahan

Where is the best Mexican food in the U.S.? It's a complex question fueled with fiery debates and passionate proclamations.

Even just Googling the question dredges up all sorts of answers. But Arizona cities remain at the top.

One city, in particular, claims the title of UNESCO's City of Gastronomy, and is due in major part to the Mexican food scene. It is also worth noting that it is the *first* city in the whole United States to get this distinction. .. and it's rubbing shoulders with culinary giants like Phuket, Thailand and Parma, Italy.

You might think – and quite understandably – that *this* city must have the best Mexican food in the country. If the world recognizes it, so should you.

Buuuuuut, it's not that simple.

Oh, and that city with the fancy title? It's Tucson. They boast 23 miles of quality Mexican food.

However, Phoenix is more than happy to step into the ring to duke it out on who has the best Mexican food. With literally hundreds of shops, from humble food trucks to exquisitely high-brow dining concepts, Phoenix holds its own as a culinary contender.

This is Valley 101, a podcast by The Arizona Republic and AZCentral.com. I'm your producer Kaely Monahan. Here, we answer your questions about metro Phoenix and beyond...even confronting the contentious questions like who has better Mexican food, Phoenix or Tucson?

And today, I'm playing referee between two Mexican food heavy-weights: Phoenix and Tucson.

At the start of this year, another article appeared on my radar. It was in the National Geographic, and it had the provocative title [“Is Tucson the best city for Mexican food in the U.S.?”](#)

Honestly, I was hooked. I wanted to hear the arguments. At least the writer of this article has roots in Arizona, even if she now lives in New York City. She talks about growing up on Sonoran-style burritos, and goes into delicious detail on how the cheese melts and the flour tortillas taste.

I can appreciate her mouth-watering prose, but I grew up in metro-Phoenix. Some of my earliest memories of Mexican-food are eating bean and cheese burritos with Mexican-style Fanta at Lulu's Taco Shop in Gilbert.

I am also a staunch supporter of Parrilla Los Picos on the border of Mesa and Tempe. And I have many fond memories of nights out with friends and stopping at either the Melrose staple, Mi Patio, or Filberto's near The Rock on 7th Avenue.

That said, I have also lived in Tucson, and as a young U of A Wildcat I would often go to friends' houses for homemade Mexican food, or if I was feeling fancy, I'd drive to El Charro in downtown.

But I really wanted to hear what the people had to say about Phoenix versus Tucson. So, naturally I made [a Twitter poll](#).

Initially, it was a neck and neck, with support for Phoenix and Tucson. But word got out quickly and the supporters for Tucson came in full force.

780 people responded. Tucson got 66-percent of the votes.

And the commentary...was varied....

"Phoenix has been coming up strong this week for me. In a single stripmall I found Michoacán enchiladas, goat birria, Sinaloan aguachile, Mexico City huaraches and two different raspados shops. Pretty impressive"

"Between these 2 places Tucson has better Mexican food. The real fight is between Yuma and Douglas."

"I feel like this survey is kinda like asking if Walmart or Target has better toothbrushes. But, having said that, I also write in Globe-Miami. I also shopped at K-Mart."

"It's tough to choose!!!"

"I'm curious to read the results, because if I'm honest, so far it all pales in comparison to even the most mediocre of Mexican food restaurants in El Paso."

"Anywhere's better than Houston haha unless it comes down to red enchiladas."

"Phoenix is trash"

I must say, a surprising amount of people came out for Globe's Mexican food scene.

But in my quest to understand Phoenix and Tucson's Mexican cuisines, I turned to The Republic's own food writer, Andi Berlin.

[4:39] **Andi Berlin 1:** That's the ultimate question, right? What makes it different? So from my journeys and my travels eating all over in both cities for the past 35 years, I would say there are a lot of differences.

Part of what makes Tucson's culinary scene stand out is its incredibly long history.

Andi Berlin 2 : It's 4000 years old. So there's a lot of history there that Phoenix doesn't have. And because it's a smaller city, there are a lot of Sonoran immigrants, people from Sonora that have either grown up here or moved across the line and decided to stay there.

Naturally the food cultures melded and grew. Much of the Tucson-Mexican food is based in Northern Mexican, specifically Sonoran, flavors.

Andi Berlin 3: It has a really strong identity of carne asada, carne seca, the dried beef. They have restaurants like El Charro that have been there since 1922. There's a really strong history there.

Contrast that with Phoenix, which is a newer city that's further from the border and also larger both in geography and population, and you have a city that looks like a metropolitan experiment when it comes to food.

Andi Berlin 4: Phoenix, I would say, has one of the most diverse and eclectic Mexican food scenes in the United States, aside from possibly Los Angeles. There is a breadth of so, so many different countries represented because this is an international city that we're living in, right? And there are people from all over Mexico that live there. And I'm just so surprised being here for the past year and really diving deep into the Mexican restaurants across the valley. I am so in awe of the variety that you can get here.

Andi has been taking full advantage of what Phoenix has to offer for Mexican food. She's been on a mission to find restaurants that represent every state in Mexico.

Andi Berlin 5: For example, huaraches, which is a Mexican street food corn masa snack that's kind of shaped like Mexican sandal, or like a football, kind of flat football. I could barely find those in Tucson anywhere. And like, it seems like everywhere I go, somebody has a huarache here. They're selling a huarache because they're from Mexico City or they're from Michoacán or Central Mexico, or they're people from Oaxaca.

Andi Berlin 6: So just a few blocks away from historic downtown Glendale, which is kind of a sleepy, interesting neighborhood, I was just driving through there on Glendale Avenue between like 64th and 66th Avenues. And I just noticed this really long strip mall, and by strip mall I mean one of those where it's all one building and there are just a million tiny, tiny little stores that are all connected by the same building. But it goes on for like four different shopping center lengths of strip mall. And as I was driving by there, I saw all of these different Mexican restaurants, so I said, I need to check this out.—What I found was just like, it was one of the most incredible things that I've ever seen, especially in the Valley. So they had seven different Mexican food spots in there. They have a carniceria. They've got a taco spot. They've got a homey, Michoacan style Mexican restaurant. They've got two different raspados ice cream shops. They've got a Marisco seafood place from Sinaloa. They've got a bakery from Mexico City that serves Mexico City style breads and snacks. It's just incredible. And the number of states represented there and the diversity of just that one strip mall alone really blew my mind because I've been in a lot of markets across Mexico, in Guadalajara, in Mexico City, and even a lot of the these don't have the diversity of this one random strip mall. I don't want to say random. Even those don't have the diversity of this one strip mall in Glendale.

Feeling hungry yet?

I am. So I went to explore what both Phoenix and Tucson have to offer and talk with those that know the food.

I headed to Tucson first. South of The University of Arizona is an entire mecca of Mexican restaurants.

On recommendation from Andi, I sought out Pops Hot Chicken first. Peter Yucupicio, or Pops as everyone calls him, is the mastermind behind this chicken joint.

And if you're thinking "hot chicken? That's not Mexican!" Just hold that thought.

I caught up with Pops at his second location inside the American Eat Market on the southern end of 4th Avenue. The former meat market was renovated by Mexican American entrepreneurs to showcase the flavors of the south side of Tucson. Inside the food court they have mariscos from Hermosillo, taco spots, Mexican coffee, and more.

Bright murals decorated the walls, and crisscrossing the ceiling were colorful papel picado—the Mexican paper banners. Playful music beat through the speakers.

Pops explained that his two loves are music and food. He played in a band and grew up cooking. It was on a trip with friends to the Bonnaroo Music Festival in Tennessee that he fell in love with hot chicken. It wasn't until 2019 that he began serving his own version with a very Southwestern flare.

Pops 3: it's not your traditional natural hot chicken sandwich. It has the southwest flavor, for example, instead of the Comeback sauce, which is traditional in the Nashville hot chicken sandwich, we have more of a Chipotle and mayonnaise that we put on there. And then instead of a traditional slaw, we have what we call "slaw-avocado," which is the only binding agent being avocado and lime. So it's almost like the ingredients of a taco, but inside of a hot chicken sandwich and we spice it up as hot as you want it.

He adds that if you want a "real" hot chicken sandwich, then you should go to Nashville. But what he and his cooks are doing at Pop's Hot Chicken is its own special thing.

Pops 4: And that is what Mexican food for me is taking a little bit of everything and blending it into your home,

Pops has roots in Sonora, both as a member of the Yaqui tribe through his father, and Mexican heritage from his mother. Growing up in two rich food cultures, Pops takes the flavors of his youth and creates a masterpiece that is truly unlike any other Mexican food out there.

Pops 5: There's so many Mexican restaurants here, and I felt that like at the time, we didn't have the hot chicken sandwich in Tucson, and it was a great opportunity for me to bring those flavors down here in Tucson and and not just be another Mexican restaurant, but have somewhat of a twist on, you know, what Tucson has to offer.

For Pops, Tucson is just special. There's food here you can't find anywhere else. Not even in Mexico.

Pops 6: I feel like Tucson itself has its own identity.

A short drive from American Eat Market is the historic Barrio Anita. Tucked up against Interstate 10 and Speedway Boulevard, this barrio is one of the oldest in Tucson. And it's less than a 5-minute drive from The University of Arizona.

Hidden away in this unassuming neighborhood is a legend of Mexican cuisine, but only those initiated by word-of-mouth know of its existence.

And as a U of A graduate, I'm ashamed to say I didn't know of this gem when I was going to school.

Anita's Street Market is easy to miss if you're not paying attention. It is literally neighbors with the residents of the barrio.

And that's the way it's always been, according to the Market's owner.

Gracie Soto: It's OK, though, it's OK! People are like 'Oh my god, I never knew I even existed.'" And to me, I think it's a good thing. I think it's an awesome thing

This is Gracie Soto, owner of Anita's Street Market. Her life is inextricably woven in with the market.

Gracie Soto 1: I grew up here. I've seen a lot of it change in my 36 years, this is one of the smallest and oldest barrios in Tucson. I mean, it has so much history, obviously.

We sat outside on the patio at the market. When I arrived, the market was not open. I soon discovered that Gracie and her family were preparing to have a grand reopening the very next day.

The beloved market weathered some unexpected financial upheavals, but Gracie was determined to reopen. After all, Anita's Street Market was her grandparents' dream.

Gracie Soto 2: So my grandfather originally wanted to start a business. He got into this as a market, beer, cigarettes, sold candies. You know, he started off really small. Just, you know, like I said, like just a market. And then eventually, my nana just wanted to start doing something different and they started making burritos, and my nana was really good at making her red chili. And they used to sell red chili and green chili burritos at the swap meet. So my grandfather told my nana, you know, hey, we should. What about making the red chili Burritos? Maybe they'll sell.

Pretty quickly, the burritos became incredibly popular. Soon the Soto's were expanding their menu to include tamales, quesadillas, and machaca. Initially, they ordered their tortillas from another store. But soon enough they started making their own tortillas in house.

And demand for their handmade tortillas soared.

Gracie Soto 3: They eventually started delivery, to El Charro, Papagayo, just a lot of other local restaurants there were around as well. Yeah. And then it just took off from there.

Gracie Soto 4: And you know, my mom, my mom was, I think about 21 years old when they first started here, and when they first started making their tortillas, they trained her. They taught her how to make them. At the time, she was pregnant with me. And so I was literally, you know, here already, I mean, born and raised into this business. I know nothing else.

As we talked, multiple cars would pull up, expecting the market to be open.

Gracie Soto 5: I'm sorry, we're closed. Yeah, we've been closed for a while, but we're going to reopen tomorrow. Yeah, tomorrow at 8:00, we're going to have a reopening tomorrow. Yeah, thank you. Thank you, guys.

It was clear that Anita's is dearly beloved by the barrio and Tucson at large.

Then I asked Gracie the pivotal question: Phoenix or Tucson?

Gracie Soto 6: I think I don't know. I honestly, I think that from what I because I honestly, I can be honest, I'm not have been there to taste food, but I see it all the time. You know, all over Facebook, I see what they make. I see other restaurants. I'm always looking at other places, you know, just to kind of get ideas or see what we can do different. Or, you know, what are we missing out on? I mean, our our Tucson is a I don't know. We have a lot. We have a lot going on in Tucson right now and it's pretty cool, you know, like you can. I think everything that that Phoenix has, I think honestly, I feel like we kind of had it first.

A fair enough opinion.

With promises to return once they were open, I returned to The Valley to dig further into what my home city had to offer. My first stop, Grand Avenue. It's become a destination for regional Mexican food, with restaurants like the James Beard finalist Bacanora...and our next restaurant.

Fernando Hernandez 1: Hello, my name is Fernando Hernandez. I am one of the owners and creator of Testal Mexican Kitchen.

Testal is located on Grand Avenue, near where Roosevelt and 15th Ave. intersect. When I arrived at 11 am, the restaurant was already busy.

In order to find a quieter spot, Fernando took me to a nearby coffee shop. There he first told me about his own story.

Fernando Hernandez 2:I was born in the city of [sp?] Carichi Mexico, which is kind of a southern Chihuahua. We came here when I was around 10 years old and e were not fortunate to have documents at that point, so I wasn't able to go back for a long time. Over two decades, that I couldn't go back.

Growing up undocumented in Phoenix during the height of SB1070 – the discriminatory law that allowed racial profiling – Fernando felt disconnected from his home. Inundated with all the negative press about his home state also left him feeling ambiguous about his roots.

Fernando Hernandez 3: The state of Chihuahua became kind of known or synonymous with women kidnapings, with drug violence, with murder, with theft. So if you were to go to a tourism website or whatever, they would advise against going to Chihuahua because, you know, it was like a red flag or avoid that place.

When Fernando became an adult he was able to gain his US citizenship. And that meant he could finally travel.

Fernando Hernandez 4: Funny enough, I went to Europe before I went back to my home state just because I had such a negative view of my home state.

But after visiting home, he realized he had misjudged Chihuahua.

Fernando Hernandez 5: When I was able to go back to visit...I feel almost silly. I feel almost stupid as to how I...why I had avoided that place for quite some time. I'm going to get a little bias, but it's

a beautiful, beautiful place. A beautiful state, amazing, warm, kind people, delicious food.

Reconnecting with his roots after so long ignited a desire to share the treasure that is Chihuahua with Phoenix.

Fernando Hernandez 6: I wanted to bring all that back here for people who were like me, maybe not had been able to connect or reconnect with their culture for whatever reason, and people just happened to not know about our culture where we're from. So I wanted to do all that in a place where they can also enjoy very typical burritos that are the way we consume them in Chihuahua.

So what is a key part of Chihuahuan style? When it comes to burritos, simplicity is key.

Fernando Hernandez 7: I'm going to say that ours is better. It could be a little because I grew up, and that's kind of what I was used to growing up. I used to know what I was used to eating, growing up. And that, for me, just kind of reminds me of home, a very simple, style of burrito that doesn't include rice, but it's not tucked in that it's a very simple entree that gets rolled. And again, maybe you add some beans and cheese and maybe some salsa, some hot sauce in there.

The state of Chihuahua also lays claim to the invention of the burrito, although some other Mexican states argue the point.

From Chihuahua to Sinaloa, you only need to drive a few miles to experience a new Mexican state. Chilte specializes in Sinaloan street food. Colorful tacos filled with seafood or carnitas make for a visual feast. But Chilte is pushing the boundaries of what street food can and *should* be.

Lawrence Smith 1: It has gotten us in trouble before. Not worried about it. So we're just we have fun and we do it all with respect.

This is Lawrence Smith, chef and co-owner of Chilte. Originally from Cleveland Ohio, Lawrence ended up in Arizona after some wanderings. He attended culinary school and it was at one of his chef gigs that he met his now girlfriend, Aseret Arroyo. She is from Sinaloa and together they came up with the idea for Chilte.

And even though they like to stretch the boundaries of tradition, they never stray far from it.

Lawrence Smith 2: I just got to start learning different, you know, regions of Mexican cuisine, which is awesome. We're really just rooted in Mexican. I love tradition and we look up history like, you know, Afro Latino culture does. What's the Japanese culture in Sinaloa? Like different things like that and kind of look for ways to bridge that gap through food.

When it comes to Phoenix versus Tucson, Lawrence admits that it's a tough question, but he answered without hesitation.

Lawrence Smith 3: I got to say Phoenix because I'm here. A lot of the other great chefs are here, great chefs in Tucson, but we just I feel like we have a little bit more of a like a new, you know, a new wave coming in of chefs. A lot of us trained under the old guard, kind of phasing them out, taking what we learned and putting that new modern spin on it, as well as more regional things. Tucson seems very traditional. A lot of the well-known places still probably run by the old crews, for the most part. So I think we're just we're kind of new. We're going to bring the new stuff, the new bold flavors and just mix it up.

Chilte began as a food truck, but now they are moving into a brick and mortar space at The Egyptian Motor Hotel on Grand near 7th Avenue just a few blocks away from Testal. They have plans to open shop in a couple of months.

As I started to distill what everyone told me about their styles of Mexican food, one more shop replied to my call for Mexican food experts.

Jovanna Gallo 1: My name is Jovanna Gallo. I am currently managing at the Tempe location of Los Reyes de la Torta.

Jovanna has been working with Reyes for six years now. The family owned business now has two locations, the original in Phoenix and the second shop in Tempe. And their tortas are beloved across the Valley.

I caught up with her over Zoom.

Jovanna Gallo: a torta is a Mexican version of a sandwich. A torta is made with a specific style of bread called telera. The texture of the bread is soft. I would describe it as a little buttery, but it's very tender. It's very soft if they will heat it up on the grill for you. So at the time that you're eating the sandwich, it holds everything

together and it's just a nice bread flavor to go with all of the crazy amount of ingredients that are able to put inside this sandwich.

Jovanna Gallo: This restaurant is pretty much based off of a very authentic flavor from Mexico City. The family themselves, they are from a small place in Mexico City called La Presa, so they take all their flavors from there and brought them over here. And since then, everything they've done, the tortas, there's a particular dish called upon bombaso. It's a specific type of type of torta as well. It's very popular in Mexico City, so that's where they based off all their flavors from. And then so adding to that to keep that authentic flavor, they do everything homemade from dressings to salsa to even breading the beef breading, the chicken seasoning, everything. Everything is done in-house.

Jovanna Gallo: So I think definitely throughout the years, not just this restaurant, but in general in Phoenix, you know, we also have our location in Tempe. I would definitely say the Mexican restaurants here are like top notch ours, of course. But in general, I mean, the flavors are amazing. I would say we're better than Tucson's Mexican food restaurants. Absolutely.

So what is the answer to who has better Mexican food – Phoenix or Tucson? I honestly can say it's tied. Mexican food is a very personal thing. It depends on what you grew up with, and how adventurous your palate is. Sometimes all you need is that homey, nostalgic taste of beans and rice to take you back to your childhood.

I contemplated this as I returned to the neighborhood favorite Mi Patio. This combo-style shop serves all the usual suspects, including a very delicious taco salad.

Ellio Espinosa: My brother, the cook is a cook, and he's been here 34 years. And you know, we are from Zacatecas and this is part of the style of food that we serve over here.

This is Ellio Espinosa, the general manager of Mi Patio. The restaurant has been around since 1984. And they serve, what I call, a very traditional metro-Phoenix style of Mexican food. Big burritos, saucy enchiladas, and crispy chimichangas.

I sat down with Elio and Stefanos Danielos, who is a partner at Mi Pato.

Stefanos: Well, we also have some Greek influence, actually because the original owner, Johnny is Greek. So we also have like it's

something, yes, a spinach chimichanga. We also have a year old chimichanga

Elio Esponosa 2: And we tried the best to be good.

Stefanos 2: That the interesting thing is we find a lot of kids that were like, Oh, my parents brought me here when I was five and six, and now they're coming back as adults, you know, and they're like, Oh, you know, a lot of people, they moved away and then they, you know, when they get every time in town, I come see you guys, which is great.

Mi Patio has that comfortable feeling of being home. Inside is bright and colorful with numerous posters, and signs, and those vintage parrot figurines that I used to see at my great-grandmother's home. And it is always busy, but the food is quick to arrive, and everyone there feels like family.

Stefanos Danielos 3: Now I've had some good Mexican food in Tucson. A couple of times I've been there, but the different places and Phoenix and the different vibe, a lot of the different styles with the different restaurants around here, I'd have to go with Phoenix. That would be mine if I had to choose one if I had to choose. But Tucson does have some good options, though.

And there you have it. My advice is to get out there and try as many Mexican restaurants as you can. You'll easily find your favorite...and it might just be around the block from where you live.

Thank you for listening to Valley 101. We'd love to hear what your favorite Mexican restaurants are. You can tweet us at a-z-c-podcasts.

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