

## Edible cactus episode.mp3

**Katrina** [00:00:05] The desert is a staple of the valley. We sit in the center of a hot climate with mountains and all kinds of wild plants, including, of course, cactus. But it can also be a staple in our diet. Did you know the desert can supply an abundance of food? Welcome to Valley 101, a podcast by The Arizona Republic and azcentral.com. About Metro, Phenix and beyond. I'm the new Spring producer Katrina michalak, and I'm so excited to be here with you guys today for my first episode. We're diving into the types of edible cactus Arizonans can try just by stepping into their backyards. This story starts in the Republic's backyard. The newsroom was adorable. Cat does a shock to anyone else or just me. In a quick side note, I am not from Arizona. I'm actually from the opposite side of the country, from the northeast. But as it turns out, a few cubicles away from mine environment reporter Chelsea Estrada. Olvera had experience eating cactus back home in Mexico City. She sat down with me and explained how everyone in Mexico eats. The prickly pear cactus, also called nopales cactus, can be found in grocery stores or in small markets where you can watch the grocers cut off the prickly spines. This popularity for nopales is not something that has dominated food culture in Arizona, at least not yet.

**Trilce** [00:02:01] I came to live here in Arizona two and a half years ago, and I was shocked by seeing so many cactus in the streets, in the yards. They are just ornamental, but no one eats nopales here. It's not a common practice. So yeah, I was I was kind of shocked because, well, indeed, they are edible and they are delicious and nutritious. And in Mexico it's a common practice.

**Katrina** [00:02:46] Maybe you haven't noticed catches before in your neighborhood grocery store. It pops up in some local restaurants too, such as Taco Guild in Phenix. Located off seventh Street on East Osborne Road. This spot offers two dishes with cactus for brave souls in the valley. Nicole Bush has been the head chef at Taco Guild since June 2023. He previously worked at Pig and Pickle, where he experimented with pickle and cactus, a skill that he still uses at Taco Bell.

**Nicholas** [00:03:21] We have two dishes on the menu where we utilize, cactus. One is on our quarter, which has cook. You need up the bill, the pickle cactus crema, and then watercress. So the reason why I wanted to add pickled cactus it is there are ingredients that are very savory. So using acid ingredient which the pickled cactus is. It kind of accentuates other flavors. So that was kind of my idea with using it on the quarter.

**Katrina** [00:03:59] The other option divides consumers with a meatless cactus option.

**Nicholas** [00:04:04] And then the other dish that we use it for is our fried cauliflower taco. Our vegetarian tacos that we offer here. And that one was just kind of the same mentality. Cauliflower. It's good flavor. But cauliflower is one of the things that you you want to add something to it just to brighten it up. So that was again kind of the idea of using the cactus on the cauliflower taco.

**Katrina** [00:04:39] These two dishes, a taco guilt provide a unique way for people to try something new and experiment with edible cactus. But let's just say, for argument's sake, people are trying not to eat out as much, or they want to know how to prepare cactus themselves. There is a way for people to learn more about the different types of cactus in the ways they can be prepared to eat, and there's actually nutritional benefits to eating cactus. The learning starts in your backyard, literally. And this is where the story takes us next. Hello. Hi. How are you? Good morning. So thank you so much. How are you doing?

The truth is, the wild plants in our valley are so much more than their natural beauty. They provide herbs and fruits that are jam packed with nutrients. Who better to convince us to eat cactus than the expert in foraging herself? Cactus? Kelly.

**Cactus Kelly** [00:05:39] Hi, I'm Kelly Athena. I've lived here in the valley for 36 years now, and I love teaching people about the edible plants of the Sonoran Desert in our yards and in the desert around us. So I'm known as Cactus Kelly on Facebook and Instagram and so on. And I teach at the Desert Botanical Garden, so I just love to share anything I can about this.

**Katrina** [00:06:01] Kelly leads local foraging trips to educate Valley residents about the edible parts of a cactus, and teaches cactus cooking classes at Desert Botanical Gardens. But before we dive in further, what is foraging? You may ask?

**Cactus Kelly** [00:06:18] Foraging is getting food from the wild or your yard urban foraging? It just means you're getting it from a tree that is already growing there, or a plant, and it's not something you've planted yourself. So you get to do the harvest, but you don't have to do the planting.

**Katrina** [00:06:36] So you can skip over the planting stage and jump immediately to the fruits of your labor. The idea of harvesting the plants in your backyard may be daunting, especially for those who aren't familiar with the different types of cactus and how to properly collect them. To give you a better idea, we went on a little expedition ourselves.

**Cactus Kelly** [00:07:00] Yeah, you.

**Katrina** [00:07:01] Bite into it.

**Cactus Kelly** [00:07:02] And if they're seeds, you just do those. They're good. It's quite sour. I think it's pretty.

**Katrina** [00:07:12] Don't that sour?

**Cactus Kelly** [00:07:15] Got the barrel cactus and the barrel cactus. Just like the prickly pear cactus does not really yield fruits in the wild around the Phenix area, you'd have to go to higher elevation. And with the drought the last few years, there have been no fruits that I've seen on barrel cactus or prickly pears. Now, if you're down in Tucson and higher elevation around there, they have plentiful amount of fruits. So I get permission from people's yards. They're like a decorative, beautiful little cactus, and they have little yellow pineapple looking fruits that grow in a circle on top. And so when they're ready to be picked, you wiggle them just like a tooth did. This is last year's or two years ago. So the newest ones are in the middle, the green and try to wiggle that. It's pretty firm.

**Katrina** [00:08:03] This.

**Cactus Kelly** [00:08:04] Yeah the top okay. Then you kind of wiggle the whole fruit. Yeah. Oh did come out well.

**Katrina** [00:08:11] To wiggle the fruit out of the barrel. Cactus foragers should use a pair of tongs, but you can use your fingers if you're careful. And wearing a thick pair of gloves. Residents can eat the fruit directly from the cactus, or scoop out the black seeds inside and use a frying pan to cook that.

**Cactus Kelly** [00:08:29] We're stirring up all these barrel cactus seeds, and we put some ironwood beans in there, too, and some oil, and we'll put salt on it. And about two minutes and they're done.

**Katrina** [00:08:40] Besides the barrel cactus, the prickly pear cactus is also fair game for residents to forage.

**Cactus Kelly** [00:08:47] The main cactus here in the Phenix area are the prickly pear cactus, which you see all over the place in people's yards. It looks like Mickey Mouse ears connected together and has a lot of spines on it, and it is known for its little blockades, which are tiny barbed spines that can dig into your fingers and thighs wherever it touches you. You have to be so careful and use tongs only not your hands to pick those. And so they're used to make margaritas. That's one of the favorite things. You can make juice out of them, add some lemon and then make a mocktail or a cocktail. And I also dry the fruits after I've made the juice. And then I make that into tea.

**Katrina** [00:09:44] Not just the fruit, but the prickly pear. Cactus itself is also edible and holds nutritional value.

**Cactus Kelly** [00:09:51] Pads of the prickly pear cactus, also called paddles or nopales. They are super good for you high insoluble fiber, which means it slows down absorption of sugar. So it really helps your glucose levels. And it's high in vitamin C, vitamin A, iron, calcium, magnesium, vitamin K. It's full of water for hydration, so I usually pick the pads only of the viscous index. Prickly pear also called Indian fig. In spring. They have small pads and use gloves. And you take a knife and you cut it off at the base just above where it's connected to the pad below. And then you bring it home and you rinse it, and then you take a knife and scrape along each side. You cut around the little outside where most of the tiny spines are, and then you turn it over, do the same thing, and then you can cut it up into strips. And that's called no, Carlitos. We've got the Sahara, which is the icon of the desert, and the tall columnar cactus with the arms, the welcoming arms to Arizona. So that is the main and most respected cactus of the locals, the awesome people, the Papago down in Tucson and the awesome and the salt River tribes here. So that would start their calendar year. They used a long saguaro rib with a little crossbar, and I've been fortunate enough to have them invite me along to harvest soil fruit that way. So you knock off the fruits when they're ripe, and it just happens to be the hottest time of the year the last week of June, maybe first week of July. And so you knock them off and you try to catch them with a bucket or a toe box, your partner, and then they are a red pulp with little black seeds filled with tons of little black seeds, and they're just a really good crunchy seed. So you can separate those two and make sirup out of the pulp and roast the seeds. Or you can keep it together and dry it, and it's like a delicious candy.

**Katrina** [00:12:01] So our own homes hold the key to so many delicious foods. Kelly also pointed out that Valley citizens won't find any poisonous cactus nearby. She also confirmed that it is legal to pick the fruit of any of these cacti, including from the beloved Sahara. As long as the cactus is on private property in the forge or has permission from the landowner. So why isn't foraging more popular for residents of Arizona?

**Cactus Kelly** [00:12:32] It's just so convenient to go to the store and just get snacks there, and not even have to think about the plants around you. They're just kind of like a background noise. But once they taste some of these and they see how good it is, some people get into it. But it is a lot of work and everybody's working full time and kids, and

they don't have an extra hour to go out and see if the cactus are ready to pick and then prepare it. So I always suggest go to a forager and do it in person with them, somebody that is for sure knows what is edible and how to prepare it, and then you can go out and do it on your own.

**Katrina** [00:13:09] There are also, of course, ethical rules to consider when foraging. Once you get the hang of it.

**Cactus Kelly** [00:13:16] There are ethical rules about this. Basically, leave enough for the animals. So if I'm out wanting to get a pincushion cactus fruit and there's only 20 of the cactus around, I might pick one if I do any at all. But in people's yards, there's also animals that could come there that you want to leave low hanging fruits on the prickly pear because the rabbits like those the birds come and eat those. The finch, the mockingbird.

**Katrina** [00:13:50] Foraging opens up so many possibilities for Valley residents, whether it's finding a new hobby, getting groceries from a closer proximity, or even just realizing they're a fan of cactus. People have actually been eating cactus for at least 300 generations, according to Kelley, with many native tribes using it as a staple in dishes.

**Cactus Kelly** [00:14:13] So I want to shout out some gratitude to the awesome people and others that provided all this wisdom and all this knowledge. We would know nothing without them.

**Katrina** [00:14:26] That was a lot of information about for Jane. But before we go, just a couple more tips for our first time adventurers out there.

**Cactus Kelly** [00:14:36] But you have to know what equipment to take. For which cactus, for instance, the prickly pear. You take the gloves. The only ones that really keep the little pockets out are welding gloves. But then you can hardly move your fingers, and you take long tongs and you take extra tongs in case those break, and you take five gallon buckets to fill it with. And if it's too heavy, don't carry it.

**Katrina** [00:15:02] And as we all know, watch out for those spines. Take a lesson from Nick one time.

**Nicholas** [00:15:11] Not my, finest moment because, yeah, I didn't realize that they weren't clean and. Yeah, going to grab a cactus bare handed with thorns. Nah. And it. Yeah, it'll it'll kind of make you go. Oh, hey. Oh. Oh.

**Katrina** [00:15:35] Thank you for listening to this episode of Valley 101, a podcast by The Arizona Republic and azcentral.com. If you enjoyed this episode, share it with your friends. And if you haven't already, make sure you're subscribed. Don't forget to rate and review us. Go ahead, give us five stars. Remember to submit your questions about Phoenix and Arizona to Valley 101 azcentral.com. Your question might be in our next episode. Follow us on Twitter and Instagram at AzC podcasts. This episode was created by me. Katrina Michalak. Amanda Luberto and Kaely Monahan provided additional production support. Kara Edgarson provided episode oversight. Music for this and all our shows comes from Universal Production Music. Valley 101 is An Arizona Republic and AZCentral.com production. Thanks for listening. We'll see you next week.