

TRIBAL FLAVORS

Fine dining discovers the roots of American food—Native American, that is—in Arizona



TRICKY HARVEST

Towering saguaro cactus, a traditional Native American ingredient, as seen in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument in Arizona

AMERICANS MAY think of mesquite only in the context of outdoor grilling, but it plays a much bigger role at Kai, a Native American fine-dining restaurant at the Sheraton Wild Horse Pass Resort & Spa in the Phoenix suburb of Chandler. The mesquite tree's sweet pods and seeds are put to varied use in the kitchen, while menus made from mesquite wood sport original watercolor paintings by an artist from the local Gila River Indian Community (which includes members of both the Pima and Maricopa tribes).

"Kai is not chef-driven but community-driven," says Chef de Cuisine Joshua Johnson, in a humble

testament to the Wyoming native's willingness to learn from his Native American staff. He adds, "We have more support from Gila River Indian Community leadership than perhaps any other Native American restaurant in the nation."

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Discover the finer side of mesquite and other nuances of Native American dining in Phoenix with nonstop flights from all seven of our U.S. hubs, in Chicago, Denver, Houston, Los Angeles, New York/Newark, San Francisco and Washington, D.C.

That support manifests itself in access to normally off-limits ingredients, like the fruit of the towering saguaro cactus. Gila River's council of elders even gives its final stamp of approval before dishes hit the menu. At right are a few of *Rhapsody's* favorite menu items, from a mesquite-kissed cocktail to chile-spiked elk loin.

—AMBER GIBSON

TWO COURSES (AND A COCKTAIL) AT KAI

DRINK KAI OLD FASHIONED "ON THE ROCK"

Every detail in this updated classic is handcrafted, from the Voss water ice sphere to local bourbon and figgy-pudding bitters made by AZ Bitters Lab. The finishing touch is mesquite-bean syrup, for a rich molasses note that isn't too sweet.

ENTREE HIGH COUNTRY ELK LOIN

Elk may not be native to Phoenix, but Kai gives its loin a local kick with a rub and marinade of guajillo, mulato and cascabel chiles, blended with saguaro cactus seeds and syrup, which can only be harvested by community members on tribal lands. Chef Johnson adds hibiscus to balance the heat with sweetness.

DESSERT GILA RIVER MESQUITE SHORTBREAD

Kai's shortbread is made from dried mesquite pods ground into a flour called *pinole* and served with tangy goat cheese, roasted figs and dates, smooth Fontainebleau mousse, kumquat and spiced pear—all flavors that complement the mesquite's earthy, nutty taste. It's a subtly sweet riff on a European cheese course.