

# FLAVOURS OF THE SOUTHWEST

story & photography  
BY JOSEPHINE MATYAS

There are three things the American Southwest delivers like clockwork: frame-worthy scenery, spicy foods and a margarita that announces itself to your tastebuds.

It's easy to find world-class eateries and bars in the big cities of Arizona and New Mexico – Phoenix, Tucson, Albuquerque – a literal ground zero for snazzy resorts, manicured golf courses and blissful spas. But it turns out that fiery foods, cold drinks and incredible flavours are an everyday part of the smaller communities that pepper the southern part of these two states. It's a backdrop where the green chile reigns supreme and the locals will happily share their secrets of freshly made salsa.

Is it difficult to find the authentic in a land built on legend? Happily, the Southwest doesn't disappoint there either: there's oodles of wild west lore, calorie-crushing hikes through some of the continent's best wilderness, a round or two on the golf course and the work of artisans that are splashed with the colours and textures of the sun-drenched Southwest.

**THERE'S A BIT OF HEAD SCRATCHING** and suspension of disbelief needed on a walk through the International UFO Museum in Roswell, New Mexico. It all began on a summer's afternoon in 1947 when two locals stumbled across metallic-looking scrap scattered across ranchlands on the edge of town. There was a flurry of affidavits followed by a denial from the country's military – and the bizarre Roswell incident found its way into the pages of history. More than 60 years later, Roswell has made lemonade from lemons along a main street lined with alien-themed shops. The town is also a stop on New Mexico's Green Chile Cheeseburger Trail and they serve up a tongue-sizzling Fire-Roasted Green Chile Cheeseburger at downtown Peppers Grill & Bar. A handmade beef patty is topped with Monterey Jack and a thick slice of roasted Chaves County-grown hot green chile. For added heat, the burger is served on a jalapeño bun and a side of green chile enchilada sauce for dipping.

**TO THE WEST**, near the opposite border of the state, the arts-rich community of Silver City bills itself as a gateway to the Continental Divide Trail and to the 2.7 million acres of the protected Gila National Forest. Snowbirds, retirees, artisans and those who worship the →















→ outdoors are seduced by the remoteness, the easy-to-take weather and the quirky arts-bent.

"This town has a way of sinking its hooks into you," claims Mitchell Hellman who moved to Silver City 11 years ago to open Alotta Gelato, the only gelato shop within a two-hour drive. Among the shop's 32 flavours is Gila Conglomerate, a caramel gelato blended with crushed Heath bars and chocolate chips, named after a type of rock found in the area.

It doesn't take long to see what he means. Bullard Street – Silver City's main drag – has a frozen-in-time quality. It's lined with Victorian and old west facades, many painted in a veritable Crayola box of wild pinks, blues and greens. Many old brick walls are painted with murals depicting the region's colourful mining history. The website Smithsonian.com recently named Silver City as one of America's Best Small Towns To Visit in 2014.

At the town's main intersection – Bullard and Broadway – the bar at the Little Toad Creek Brewery & Distillery isn't shy when it comes to green chile. The micro-distillery cooks up a green chile vodka: "Green chile on the nose and heat on the finish," explains the bartender. The bar's signature cocktail is a Jalapeño-Rita, a Southwest style margarita created with vodka infused with muddled jalapeños. Think a traditional margarita stamped with Southwest flair.

**DRIVING THE ROADWAY** north to the Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument can make one a little edgy. The dead-end trip – 90 minutes one way along a narrow, twisty mountain road – crosses through a series of eco-life zones, from desert to piñon pine to towering ponderosa pine. In spots the road is hemmed in by rock wall on one side and a drop off along the other. No guardrails. Still, it's the only road to some of the best-preserved Native American cliff dwellings in the Southwest. At the site, it's a half-hour uphill climb to the series of seven rooms, built under overhangs that provided natural shelter and protection from the elements.

"These people may have moved on because they were looking for their heartland," speculates Bill Bramlett, a volunteer interpreter with the National Parks Service atop the Cliff Dwellings site. "Or they may have moved on because it just got so flat out dangerous to be a small community. It is not uncommon for pueblos to have been built, inhabited and then abandoned after 20 or 30 years. No one really knows for sure."

Back on the road, there's lots of local colour in historic Pinos Altos, a speck of a community near Silver City where the dining magnet →

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## GOURMET GETAWAY THE SOUTHWEST



➔ is definitely The Buckhorn Saloon. Behind its thick adobe walls is the real deal, complete with a bison head above the bar, a pot bellied stove that's been a fixture since 1897 and locals who don't hesitate to pull up a chair and launch into conversation. Chef-owner Thomas Bock is a transplant from a successful urban restaurant career in San Francisco. Bock took to his new surroundings with gusto and in true New Mexican fashion he unleashed the power of the green chile on the menu. He serves up bowls of thick, meaty green chile stew, flavoured with onions and served with soft, warm tortillas for sopping up the drippings. The Saloon's signature Green Chile Cheese Fries are Pinos Altos' flavour-laden salute to poutine – a plate of fries smothered with a green chile sauce and melted Monterey Jack cheese. The juicy, cooked-to-order Buffalo Burger

gets its extra kick from a slice of fresh green chile.

**AFTER CROSSING THE STATE LINE** into southern Arizona, there's the Salsa Trail, a cluster of a dozen authentic eateries in Graham County where salsa and Mexican flavours reign supreme. At El Mesquite Taqueria in the village of Pima, owner Jesus Cabrera serves a delicious Carne Asada Burrito and slow-cooked beef in the Birria Tacos topped with a piquant house-made Sonoran-style salsa. Cabrera sticks close to family recipes from Mexico, roasting his own green chiles over a mesquite fire. The surroundings are modest but the flavours are top shelf.

At the breakfast hour it seems half the town of Safford stops in for the Huevos Rancheros at El Coronado on Main Street. Four Stetson-topped locals fill a booth, steaming mugs of java in



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hand while dallying over the menu. Owner Mary Coronado has a quick laugh and twinkle in her eye as she boasts about her win at the town's annual Salsafest challenge. "I've been doing it the same for 30 years: oregano, cumin, fresh garlic, fresh jalapeño, a few Serrano chiles, onions, cilantro and tomatoes."

Back on the road the pull of the margarita finally trumps hunger. And the Salsa Trail doesn't disappoint there either. At La Paloma, in the village of Solomon just outside Safford, it turns out that a frosty margarita is the perfect ramp up to the house specialty of Chile Rellenos. The classic Mexican dish is made of mild Anaheim chiles roasted to remove the skin, then stuffed with cheddar cheese, fried in a light egg batter and smothered with two housemade enchilada sauces.

**CROSSING THE BOTTOM OF THE STATE** fires all the senses: the Large Binocular Telescope at Discovery Park and the Native American pottery collection at the Mills Collection in Safford, the pinnacles and balanced rocks of the "sky island" at Chiricahua National Monument, the off-the-wall counter-culture of artsy Bisbee and the spellbinding underground world of Kartchner Caverns.

By the time we reach Tubac I am feeling a tad menu weary. I want Southwest but need a break from the ubiquitous green chile and bowls of red tomato salsa. The waiter at the Tubac Golf Resort's Stables Ranch Grille prescribes the perfect antidote: the signature Cadillac Margarita, made with Patrón tequila, a splash of Grand Marnier, zesty lime and rough kosher salt on the rim. It goes down easily and is the perfect warm up for another signature dish – the rib eye steak followed by a wedge of housemade cheesecake doused with sweet prickly pear syrup.

I catch the waiter's eye and signal for a refill. Somehow this just doesn't feel like a time to abandon the rich flavours of the Southwest. ☎

## If you go

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