

Stirring it up

by Gillian - Sunday, January 04, 2015

<http://3storymagazine.com/tucson-food-and-drink-trends/>

From community dinners and cooking classes to game dishes and health coaches, the Tucson food and drink scene just won't sit still. We take a look at who and what will be causing a stir in 2015. (On the cover: Proper's Porch Tea cocktail.)

Photo by Jocelyn Warner-Brokamp

"What we're seeing right now is this creativity that is astounding," says Manish Shah of Tucson's flourishing food scene. "Tucson was always pretty good with the middle of the road. I grew up here. Mexican food, steakhouses - that was pretty much it. But now - the creativity, the passion, the energy..."

And Manish should know. As owner of the [Maya Tea Company](#) he supplies a bunch of Tucson restaurants with tea. And as co-executive director of [Heirloom Farmers Markets](#), in a roundabout way he supplies them with food too. When you have restaurants as reliant on local produce as they are in Tucson (downtown Tucson's Proper restaurant recently launched a whole "[market dinner](#)" concept based exclusively on farmer's market buys from the day before), it's wise to listen to Manish.

Manish Shah of Heirloom Farmers Markets and Maya Tea Company. Photo by Jocelyn Warner-Brokamp

Who has the attention of Manish right now? Two words: Kris Vrolijk. The chef at [Proper](#) is being so experimental, says Manish, that "I worry about him sometimes." A case in point: Kris's unique take on Caesar Salad, which will be on the new dinner menu next weekend. It features grilled and chilled brussels sprouts and crispy parmesan, seared on the griddle.

Proper is owned by SLO Restaurant Concepts (the SLO stands for sustainable, local, organic) which also owns [Brix Restaurant and Wine Bar](#) and [Criollo Latin Kitchen](#) in Flagstaff, AZ. It just added a butcher shop, Proper Meats and Provisions, to its Flagstaff operations and in Tucson its long-awaited butcher and sandwich shop in Tucson will open on Congress Street in May.

Proper on Congress Street. Photo by Gillian Drummond

Cody Gallacher, Proper's assistant manager (a guy who worked his way up from a server), says consumers and diners are getting educated. "They're realizing not all carrots are orange, you can get purple and yellow ones." Referring to [supermarket campaigns in Europe to promote 'ugly' fruits and vegetables](#), he adds: "I'm glad we're finally getting away from that stigma that food has to be pretty or genetically modified to be good."

Whether it's pretty, ugly or in between, we Tucsonans do want to know where our food comes from - the more locally sourced the better. And if you sometimes feel like you're in that "Is it local?" sketch from *Portlandia*, tough. Expect the same in 2015, with farmer's markets, natural food stores, cocktail-and-food crossovers, and more.

[YouTube Video](#)

Community's the thing

Community was the buzzword last year in the food and drink world, with events such as the Downtown Chef's Table dinner, the launch late last year of Proper's Monday night community dinners, and the opening of a permanent farmer's market structure at [Rillito Park](#), courtesy of Heirloom Farmers Market and Pima County. Heirloom's Manish Shah has big plans for the space in 2015: chef demos, community events, perhaps themed events. The market "is not just a cement patch with a roof", says Manish, but

represents a connection between local food and the community. Plus, he adds a fourth farmer's market location this Friday, at Trail Dust Town on Tucson's east side.

The farmer's market at Tucson's Rillito Park. Photo by Jocelyn Warner-Brokamp.

Healthy eating know-how

Gluten-free. Sugar-free. Paleo. Juicing. And don't forget all those home-grown veggies you suddenly have on your hands. There's a massive shift towards healthier eating, but we don't all have the skills to prepare the food. That's where cooking classes come in. They're on the up, and set to grow even more this year.

"So many people want to change their diets but don't have a clue as to how to change what they are eating and how to prepare meals for themselves and their families," says Norma Gentry, who represents a number of chefs and restaurants in Tucson.

The cooking demos Norma has been managing at Tucson's Williams Sonoma store on Saturday afternoons have been hopping. And look out for some healthy cooking demos at [Natural Grocers](#), opening in Tucson January 20th at East Broadway Blvd. Chefs Sybil Parsa (January 22nd) and [Haile Thomas](#) (January 28th and February 4th) are already slated to appear.

This will be the fourth store in Arizona and the first in Tucson for Natural Grocers, an organic grocery and natural supplements chain. One of its signature touches is to provide a "health coach" to answer customers' dietary questions.

Natural Grocers will open its first Tucson store this month. Photo courtesy of Natural Grocers

What's for dinner?

Jared Scott, executive chef at [Maynards](#), expects game birds - pheasant, duck, squab - to turn up on more menus in 2015 as diners move away from red meat and pork. "That [move] doesn't leave a lot to desire but fish and chicken. The introduction of other poultry options really opens up a whole new world. Duck and pheasant are much more rich while squab and chicken are more mild. You can do drastically different things with poultry," says Jared.

Jared Scott. Photo courtesy of Maynards Kitchen.

In the drinks world, we'll continue to see symbiosis between cocktail ingredients and the kitchen, says David Clark, bartender at [Hotel Congress](#). His inspiration for drinks, seasonal or not, lie in the pantry, the cooler, even the baker's area of the kitchen. He might sprinkle a few Graham crackers into a cocktail for some wintry flavor, he says. Craft cocktails and the label 'mixologist' may still be surging in popularity but Tucson's barkeeps are not letting it go to their heads. "You're seeing a loss of pretentiousness," says David. "Here in Tucson it's just laid back. We're all bartenders."

The beer sector is getting in on the new cocktail craze too. Look out for more "beer cocktails' in 2015, says Rebecca Safford, owner of [Tap & Bottle](#). She predicts more beers infused with coffee, citrus and chiles for unique aromas and flavors. Sour beers are on the rise as well, and to celebrate Tap & Bottle has its second annual 'Sour Fest' this Spring.

People to watch in hospitality this year:

* **Page Repp** and **Rick Mclain**. If you don't know them yet, better write their names down. They're neither chefs, bartenders nor suppliers, but their influence on Tucson's hospitality sector is huge. [Repp + Mclain](#), their architecture and design firm, is behind too many stylish restaurants and bars in the city to mention. Last year alone saw their name attached to [R Bar](#), [Sidecar](#) (in which they each have ownership), the new Mexican eatery [Reforma](#), and the basement bar at [Reilly Craft Pizza](#). Look out for their name attached to more, as yet undisclosed, restaurant openings in 2015.

Jason Anderson. Photo courtesy of Sol Hospitality.

* **Jason Anderson.** He's the brains behind [Nox](#) in the Foothills and [Goodness](#), a healthy fast casual concept that started on a busy stretch of Campbell Avenue and branched to the University area two months ago. He opened Union Public House and for a short time ran the Asian restaurant Umi Star. Jason's company, Sol Hospitality, is one to watch. It plans to open four more branches of Goodness this year (in order: Columbia, South Carolina; Madison, Wisconsin; Phoenix; and Eugene, Oregon) and possibly one on Tucson's east side. And the company's long-planned restaurant on 4th Avenue will be a full-service Mexican restaurant.

Although Jason loves his home town (he was born and bred in Tucson) and seems to be on a roll, he admits he's had his fingers burned here. "It's very old school, very southwest, very relaxed. There's a really traditional way of doing things in Tucson." Too traditional, apparently, for "rad sushi" and cocktail concept Umi Star, which was in the space Goodness on Campbell Avenue now occupies. "I pushed it a little bit too far with that one," he smiles.

* The last mention goes to **Manish Shah**, one to watch not only for the farmer's markets he operates but also for his tea firm. Within the next few weeks the Maya Tea Company will open an 8,000 sq ft manufacturing facility (they made their own tea when they first started the company, then subcontracted

their manufacturing.)

*** Look out for a full interview with Jason Anderson in 3 *Story* later this month.**

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