

NEIGHBORHOOD EATS



WHERE TO FIND COZY RESTAURANTS ACROSS THE VALLEY

By Howard Seftel

Republic restaurant critic

Despite the Valley's staggering number of chain restaurants, there still are neighborhood pockets whose residents support first-rate local eats.

Sure, downtown Phoenix has award-winning Pizzeria Bianco and Nobuo at Teeter House. And Scottsdale's Old Town spots are destinations for tourists and locals alike.

But we're talking under-the-radar spots that serve an appreciative neighborhood clientele. They are places to kick back on a weeknight when you're too pooped to cook or to linger in-expensively on a Saturday night.

Here are some neighborhood spots — east side, west side, all around the town — that are worth exploring, even

if you don't live nearby.

Pancakes, hamburgers, chicken-fried steak, pizza, pasta, pierogi, spring rolls, tapas, pot roast, ice cream, tacos: Whatever your hankering, it can be handsomely satisfied.

Midtown Phoenix

Lux Central

This former coffee shop has tweaked its name, moved into a larger spot next door and turned into what owner Jeff Fischer calls a "beverage-driven pub." Yes, the coffee and pastries are still there, but now you can enjoy a cocktail and make a meal out of tapas, chicken pot pie, French-inspired terrines and a cheeseburger set on Yorkshire pudding.

Details: 4400 N. Central Ave., 602-696-9976, luxcoffee.com.

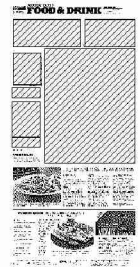
Pane Bianco

Thanks to expanded hours, James Beard Award winner Chris Bianco's sandwich shop (the mozzarella, tomato and basil is amazing) now offers a limited dinner menu. Right-hand man Claudio Urciuoli is overseeing the operation, and he's whipping up such dishes as antipasti, bean and escarole soup, and sausage with polenta.

Details: 4404 N. Central Ave., 602-234-2100, pizzeriabianco.com.

Maizie's Cafe and Bistro

This cute spot sends out a happy vibe, thanks to the talented kitchen. You can go international with such starters as Thai lettuce wraps and



grilled asparagus bruschetta. Then move on to all-American favorites such as pizza, pasta and the first-rate "inside-out" burgers, which come stuffed, not topped, with the usual accessories.

Details: 4750 N. Central Ave., 602-274-2828, maiziescafe.com.

St. Francis

This strikingly designed place has more going for it than good looks. Chef Aaron Chamberlin uses his wood-burning oven to full advantage, with dishes such as pork chile verde, roast vegetables, pot roast, roast chicken, killer flatbreads and Moroccan-spiced meatballs. Go ahead and fill up on the homemade bread, too — it may be the Valley's best.

Details: 111 E. Camelback Road, 602-200-8111, stfrancisaz.com.

Windsor and Churn

Postino's Craig DeMarco has restored a 1940 building and installed two side-by-side neighborhood spots. Windsor offers such inexpensive favorites as hot dogs, burgers, pot pies and casseroles. Churn is the ice-cream parlor with a self-consciously old-fashioned air, emphasizing basic flavors such as vanilla, chocolate and butter pecan.

Details: 5223 N. Central Ave., 602-279-1111, windsoraz.com (Windsor); 602-279-8024 (Churn), churnaz.com.



Coronado District- Seventh Street, Phoenix America's Taco Shop

Friends and family urged schoolteacher America Corrales to open her own Mexican place, and we're the beneficiaries. The supporting cast features burritos, quesadillas and tortas, but the star performers are tacos, such as the carne

asada and tacos al pastor (ro-tisserie-spun pork) goosed up with guacamole and pineapple.

Details: 2041 N. Seventh St., Phoenix. 602-682-5627, americastacoshop.net.

Coronado Cafe

It's a homey place, and the food makes you feel at home, too. Dig into pomegranate hummus or the crab and cream-cheese dip before moving on to wraps, burgers, flatbreads or tacos. Main dishes include pan-seared miso salmon, grilled pork porterhouse and meatloaf with green-chile cream sauce.

Details: 2201 N. Seventh St. 602-258-5149, coronadocafe.com.

Rice Paper

It's the Vietnamese version of a sushi bar, spotlighting an extensive grazing list of summer rolls. There are about 15 varieties, such as the one filled with shrimp, pork and mint, served with peanut hoisin sauce. Other menu highlights include salads, pho and main dishes, such as lemongrass chicken, braised pork and quail eggs in a clay hot pot.

Details: 2221 N. Seventh St., 602-252-3326, ricepaper eatery.com.

Humble Pie

You could come here for tempura-fried green beans, a pressed roast beef and Swiss sandwich or spaghetti and meatballs. But it would be a mistake not to order pizza, such as the goat cheese with peppers or prosciutto with gorgonzola and pear. But for a real thrill, try the roasted mushrooms with pancetta, green onion and mozzarella.

Details: 2333 N. Seventh St. 602-229-1289, humblepie usa.com.

Main Ingredient Ale House & Cafe

The neighborhood comes to this budget-priced spot for nibbles, including the artichoke chile dip and the anti-

pasto platter, as well as salads, mac 'n' cheese and such hot sandwiches as the jive turkey, a baguette filled with house-roasted turkey supplemented with jalapeño cream cheese. An extensive selection of beer and wine is another attraction.

Details: 2337 N. Seventh St., 602-843-6246, tmialehouse.com.



16th Street Corridor- South, Phoenix

Pro's Ranch Market

This huge mercado offers a terrific assortment of ready-to-eat, south-of-the-border favorites. Grab a seat at one of the in-store picnic tables and linger over seafood cocktails, pollo asado, tamales and tacos made with right-off-the-press tortillas. Don't forget the beverages, which include some of the most refreshing aguas frescas around.

Details: 1602 E. Roosevelt St., 602-254-6676, prosranch.com.

Mariscos Playa Hermosa

No, you're not actually hearing swooping seagulls screech around a pier. But the vibrant Mexican seafood here may transport you to a Mexican beach. The skilled kitchen does outstanding work, including the mixed seafood cocktail, seven-seas stew, crab enchilada and fish Veracruzana. Note to octopus fans: Don't miss the pulpo ranchero.

Details: 1605 E. Garfield St., 602-462-1563, mariscosplaya hermosa.com.

La Frontera

You can't get any more down-home: La Frontera is a truck parked on an empty downtown Phoenix lot. But the great, dirt-cheap tacos, served on corn tortillas with lime and sliced cucumber, will take your mind off the lack of scenery. Among the tasty options are carne asada, al pastor, carnitas, barbacoa, lengua and chichar-

ron.

Details: 16th and Van Buren streets (southeastern corner).

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Barrio Cafe

Since 2002, chef Silvana Salcido Esparza has been showing us the difference between Mexican food and Mexican cuisine. The proof? We can point to the astonishing cochinita pibil, a Yucatán specialty; chiles en nogada, poblano peppers stuffed with nuts and fruit, coated with almond sauce; and the duck breast in tamarind chipotle sauce.

Details: 2814 N. 16th St., 602-636-0240, barriocafe.com.

La Condesa

The tacos here are as hefty as they are flavorful. It's hard to pick a favorite: You can make a strong case for the carne asada, black-mole chicken or cochinita pibil. An extensive salsa bar — about a dozen fresh varieties — can also paralyze you with indecision. Chile de arbol, peanut salsa and salsa rabano (horseradish) are among the temptations.

Details: 1919 N. 16th St., Phoenix, 602-254-6330, lacondesatacoshop.com.



16th Street Corridor-North

Rokerij

Atmospheric Rokerij, run by the team behind Richardson's, hits the neighborhood sweet spot. What's the appeal? Small plates such as chipotle ribs with dirty rice, bacon-wrapped scallops and steak tartare. Full-size entrees include chicken schnitzel, salt-and-pepper-crusted prime rib and pork tenderloin glazed with chile jelly.

Details: 6335 N. 16th St., 602-287-8900, burningembersphoenix.com.

The Vig Uptown

It's easy to hang out when the hangout makes you so comfortable. Relax over a cocktail, wine or beer, nibble on hot wings with honey-barbecue sauce, then enjoy everything from Persian chicken kebab and a prime-rib sandwich with fontina cheese to carne asada on a potato pancake and gumbo with chicken, shrimp, crab and sausage.

Details: 6015 N. 16th St., 602-633-1187, thevig.us.

Texaz Grill

Grab an icy Lone Star, pardner, and get primed for the house specialty: chicken-fried steak. It's a beauty, a big slab of cubed beefsteak, double-dipped, coated with peppery gravy and served with first-rate mashed potatoes, corn and a buttermilk biscuit. The kitchen has sent out more than 775,000 orders over the past 26 years.

Details: 6003 N. 16th St., 602-248-7827, texazgrill.com.

Coup des Tartes

Pick out a good bottle from your cellar. This charming BYOB merits the good stuff. Start off with an onion tart with Gruyere and bacon. The main-dish specialty is Moroccan-style lamb shank with pearl couscous, but salmon with smoked pistachio pesto also beckons. Then there are those signature dessert tarts, such as the chocolate s'more.

Details: 4626 N. 16th St., Phoenix. 602-212-1082, nice tartes.com.

Gasper's

The transplanted New York Italians behind this spot show off their Big Apple Italian know-how. Make a meal out of such appetizers as carpaccio and toasted ravioli, followed up by veal marsala, chicken parmigiana or osso buco. Pizza is the real deal, too. The Regina is outstanding, topped with prosciutto, arugula, mozzarella and Parmesan.

Details: 4117 N. 16th St.,

602-265-0003, gasperspizza.com.



Downtown Glendale

La Piazza al Forno

Pizza master Justin LaPiazza is certified by Verace Pizza Napoletana, an Italian association dedicated to preserving authentic Naples pizza traditions. You'll see his skill in the mouthwatering white pizza, topped with homemade mozzarella, ricotta and lots of garlic. Other good eats include lasagna, linguine with clams and Italian almond wine cake.

Details: 5803 W. Glendale Ave. 623-847-3301, lapiazzaalforno.com.

Touch of European Cafe

You don't have to be a homesick Polish expatriate to fall for this charming BYOB spot.

You just have to appreciate deliciously hearty, homemade Polish fare, such as potato-cheese pierogi, stuffed cabbage, pork goulash and bigos, a stew of smoked kielbasa, noodles and sauerkraut. Finish up with cheese blintzes or flaky pastries called kolaczki.

Details: 7146 N. 57th Drive. 623-847-7119, atouchofeuropeancafe.com.

Haus Murphy's

From the tuba and accordion oom-pah-pah entertainment to the rib-sticking fare, this German restaurant whisks you to the homeland. Sausages, sauerbraten, beef roulade and schnitzels are superb, as are the side dishes, such as red cabbage, spaetzle and potato salad. The many German brews on tap add to the fun.

Details: 5739 W. Glendale Ave., 623-939-2480, hausmurphys.com.

Little Saigon

This cute spot boasts some of the Valley's best Vietnamese dishes. The extensive menu makes it difficult to choose,

but you'd be making a mistake if you didn't zero in on the Vietnamese crepe called banh xeo, the marinated beef wrapped in grilled grape leaves, and the striking lotus-root salad mixed with pork, shrimp, pickled carrots and jicama.

Details: 7016 N. 57th Ave., 623-939-6136, littlesaigonaz.com.

Kiss the Cook

It's easier to face the day when you start the morning off at this cheery breakfast place. It's filled with antiques, knickknacks and "How ya doin', hon?" servers. And those servers will bring you a complimentary muffin basket, as well as eye-opening omelets, waffles, French toast and some of the best buttermilk pancakes in town.

Details: 4915 W. Glendale Ave., 623-939-4663, kiss-the-cook.com.



Arcadia, east Phoenix

Noca

There's a new chef on board: Matt Taylor. But owner Eliot Wexler will make sure the restaurant retains its commitment to quality ingredients and kitchen craftsmanship. Expect to see the same pristine seafood, homemade pastas and, of course, the wicked sandwiches, including the open-faced pastrami made from Wagyu brisket.

Details: 3118 E. Camelback Road, Phoenix, 602-956-6622, restaurantnoca.com.

The Grind

This is not your mainstream hamburger joint. The hook here is the 1,000-degree coal-fired grill, which gives the burgers a char and sears in the juices. The Sweet & Spicy is remarkable, lined with candied jalapeños, fried ratatouille and watercress. Get a side of roasted organic vegetables or

sweet-potato fries, and sip wine, draft beer or a cocktail.

Details: 3961 E. Camelback Road, Phoenix. 602-954-7463, the grindaz.com.

Postino Winecafe

The food is as lively as the setting, especially the best-in-town bruschetta. Among the beauties: prosciutto with figs and mascarpone; smoked salmon with pesto; and ricotta, dates and pistachios. But don't overlook such sandwiches as the Nine Iron, stuffed with chicken, bacon, burrata and mozzarella. Lots of interesting boutique wines, too.

Details: 3939 E. Campbell Ave., Phoenix. 602-852-3939, postinowinecafe.com.

La Grande Orange Pizzeria

Good luck finding a parking spot here, or summon the valet. What's the attraction? The food Americans love, done just right. It could be an orange fennel salad with goat cheese and almonds. Or maybe the scrumptious green-chile burger on homemade English muffin. Or the exceptional pizzas. A good beverage list, too.

Details: 4410 N. 40th St., Phoenix. 602-840-7777, lagrandeorangepizzeria.com.

Havana Cafe

The dishes of Latin America and Spain are chef B. J. Hernandez's canvas, and she paints a tempting picture. You could make a meal out of small plates, like shrimp pancakes, salt cod fritters and empanadas. But then you'd regret not ordering main dishes, such as Cuba's ropa vieja or chorizo-stuffed pot roast or one of the Valley's best paellas.

Details: 4225 E. Camelback Road, Phoenix. 602-952-1991, havanacafe-az.com.



Tempe/ASU Cafe Istanbul & Market

You don't need a magic carpet to whisk you to the Middle East. Cafe Istanbul carries the standards, including hummus, babaghanouj, shawarma, kefta and lemon chicken. But you can get deeper into the culinary culture with dishes that include lamb tongue, ful mudammas (mashed fava beans), ma'anek (Lebanese sausage) and lamb tartare.

Details: 1310 E. Apache Blvd. 480-731-9499, cafeistanbulandmarket.com.

House of Tricks

This cozy bungalow boasts one of the Valley's prettiest patios, and the fare keeps pace with the setting. Imaginative starters include balsamic-glazed pork belly and harissa-spiced mussels, while the contemporary main dishes range through ancho-dusted duck breast, short ribs with chipotle-watermelon barbecue sauce and goat-cheese lasagna.

Details: 114 E. Seventh St. 480-968-1114, houseoftricks.com.

Essence Bakery

Eugenia Theodosopoulos trained at Les Ecoles Lenotre in Paris, and her stunning croissants and macarons — the chocolate and caramel creams are particularly noteworthy — can compete with anything on the Left or Right banks. Light lunches are also superb, such as the orange spinach salad, quiche and jalapeño-topped croque monsieur.

Details: 825 W. University Drive. 480-966-2745, essencebakery.com.

Cafe Lalibela

It doesn't get more fun than Ethiopian cuisine. No silverware — you scoop up everything with injera, a spongy bread. You'll be scooping up various stews seasoned with berbere, a subtle spice blend of chiles, garlic and ginger. Look for lots of vegetarian dishes, too, including collard greens, lentils and a tasty mix of cab-

bage, carrots and potatoes.

Details: 849 W. University Drive. 480-829-1939, cafelalibela.com.

Cornish Pasty Co.

You'll need two hands to hold onto these pasties (pass-TEES). These English pastry pouches come stuffed traditionally, such as the steak and rutabaga; semi-traditionally, such as the cottage pie with ground beef, peas, carrots and mashed potatoes; or fancifully, such as the chicken tikka masala with green peppers and potato in red curry sauce.

Details: 960 W. University Drive. 480-894-6261, cornishpastyco.com.



Mesa/Chandler-Dobson Road Corridor Cyclo

Sassy Justina Duong injects her personality into Cyclo's energetic Vietnamese fare. There's plenty of pizzazz in nibbles, such as tamarind-glazed short ribs and spicy beef salad. Pho stocked with brisket and sirloin is perfumed with Asian spices. The headliners on the entree list are mint chile chicken and rice vermicelli with pork and sausage.

Details: 1919 W. Chandler Road, Chandler. 480-963-4490, azeats.com/cyclo.

C-Fu Gourmet

By day, C-Fu's non-stop carts wheel through the restaurant with premium dim sum, including sticky rice in lotus leaf, cheung fun noodles, stuffed eggplant and every sort of dumpling imaginable. By night, C-Fu is known for its extensive live seafood. Two of

the best: crab in black-bean sauce, and whole fish steamed with ginger and scallions.

Details: 2051 W. Warner Road, Chandler. 480-899-3888, cfugourmet.com.

Shimogamo

Why is this place so popular with visiting Japanese? No doubt the pristine sushi and sashimi are a big draw. But the chef is just as comfortable with the rest of the Japanese repertoire, including octopus ceviche, miso-marinated black cod, tempura udon-noodle soup, pork katsu and baked lobster and avocado in a mayo-based dynamite sauce.

Details: 2051 W. Warner Road, Chandler. 480-899-7191, shimogamoaz.com.

Lee's Sandwiches

The French didn't do much good in Vietnam, but they did introduce sandwiches, called banh mi. The ones at Lee's are fabulous, thanks in large part to the fresh baguettes, baked in-store. The best banh mi are filled with some form of pork — barbecued, grilled, shredded, cured, pork roll — set off with tangy pickled vegetables.

Details: 1901 W. Warner Road, Chandler. 480-855-1778, leessandwiches.com.

Asian Cafe Express

This restaurant doesn't look like much from the outside (or the inside), but the kitchen more than compensates for the lack of ambience. The menu is huge, and you'll want to focus on the authentic stuff, such as salt-and-pepper squid, sour-vegetable whole fish, hot-bean-sauce mussels and black-mushroom chow fun. Check the wall for specials.

Details: 1911 W. Main St., Mesa. 480-668-5910, asiancafeexpress.com.



White pizza from La Piazza al Forno in Glendale. Far left: Cherry tart at Coup des Tartes in Phoenix. Below: The patio at Windsor in Phoenix.

PHOTOS BY
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MCNAMARA/
THE REPUBLIC





La Frontera Mexican food truck is a downtown Phoenix delight known for its tacos. CHARLIE LEIGHT/THE REPUBLIC



Lux Central on Central Avenue in Phoenix. MICHEL DUARTE/THE REPUBLIC



Rice Paper, a Vietnamese restaurant in central Phoenix.

MICHAEL MCNAMARA/
THE REPUBLIC



The lobster roll at Noca in east Phoenix. The restaurant specializes in seafood, pasta and sandwiches. MICHAEL MCNAMARA/THE REPUBLIC



Bier bratwurst at Haus Murphy's in Glendale. MICHEL DUARTE/THE REPUBLIC



The cozy patio at House of Tricks in Tempe. DAVID M. BROWN/
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