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Places Get Graded

Farm to Table:
Tracking Your Food

Bringing Back the
Kitchen Nook

PHOENIX

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Food Tour
p. 54

85 *Best* Restaurants

Your ultimate guide to the Valley's
best places to chow down!



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You love your food fresh from the farm, but how much do you really know about the Valley's homegrown meat, eggs, produce and cheese? We've got the dirt – pesticide-free, of course – on Arizona's local food phenomenon.

By Keridwen Cornelius • Photography by Brian Goddard

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Locavore's Dilemma





H

alfway between the basil and the blood oranges come the tears. The woman looks around this small family farm, this vestige of verdure in the suburban sprawl, wipes her eyes and gushes, "It's just so beautiful."

I don't know why she's here, but I imagine that like many people, she has lost faith in her food. First the likes of *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and *Food, Inc.* exposed the dark underbelly of modern agribusiness, and Americans responded with the rallying cry, "Eat local!"

Less than a decade ago in Phoenix that would have meant prying the pads off trailside prickly pears. Today, farmers' markets are mushrooming across the Valley. Indie restaurants are salting their menus with local fare. And people are flocking to these wholesome havens hoping to find food that's good for the palate, the planet and the local economy.

Then, nationwide investigations revealed that many farmers' market vendors were buying wholesale produce and selling it as farm-fresh, and that menu labels like organic, natural, and local were often meaningless eco-babble.

The effect was like eating a waxed apple from the pesticide-treated tree of knowledge. Were that farmer's too-perfect potatoes and Stepford chives purchased at Safeway? Did this restaurant's local pork come from pigs jammed cheek-by-jowl into a wretched confinement plant in Cave Creek? Were those cage-free eggs laid by manure-plastered hens in a shed swarming with salmonella?

The solution was to visit several prominent farms throughout the Valley - to meet our homegrown meat, egg, cheese and produce purveyors, hear their stories, ask them tough questions, unveil their practices and discover the truth about Phoenix's local food.

A Tale of Two Egg Farmers

It was the year of the egg recall. In August 2010 came the largest in history: 500 million eggs, followed by 288,000 in November. Both were triggered by salmonella outbreaks, and both traced to companies owned by Austin J. DeCoster, who may be the biggest, rottenest egg mogul in the U.S. At his battery-cage egg facilities in various states, FDA inspectors have found 8-foot-high manure piles bursting through barn doors, crawling with rodents and maggots, and emitting so much ammonia that inspectors had to be medically treated for burned lungs.

Meanwhile, back in Buckeye, Clint Hickman was assuring anxious Arizonans that Hickman's Family Farms was unaffected by the recalls. In fact, since the family business began in Glendale in 1944, it has never had a salmonella scare or health violation.

The largest egg producer in the Southwest, Hickman's has nearly 5 million chickens and supplies eggs via wholesalers to supermarkets in four states and scores of local restaurants. Unlike the nation's vast majority of egg producers, whose under-the-radar facilities are as locked up as Alcatraz, Hickman's trumpets its brand and remains tied to its Arizona roots, donating to local schools and food banks and inviting journalists to tour its facilities.

"If you're truly impassioned about what you do and why you do it, you show it," says Clint, a third-generation egg farmer with the genial confidence of a salesman who genuinely believes in his product. And with that, we don white coats, hairnets and booties, wipe our feet on chlorine pellets, and enter the laying barn.

A communal clucking burbles through the air, which is mild even on this summer day and smells not of ammonia but of faint farm. Much controversy has been stirred by battery cages - the standard setup in modern egg production - and here they are: aisle after aisle, stacked six high, stretching the length of two football fields. Each cage is about the size of a file cabinet drawer and holds seven hens, affording 67 square inches of space per bird. The single page you are reading measures 93.5 square inches. Here they'll spend

Clint Hickman dons a white coat and hairnet as part of the strict food safety practices observed at Hickman's Family Farms, which has never had a salmonella scare.





Ninety-five percent of American egg-laying hens live in battery cages, like these at Hickman's Family Farms in Buckeye.

Dave Jordan (right) raises
hens, geese, ducks and guinea
fowl outside on his farm in
New River, producing eggs like
these multicolored chicken
eggs destined for Binkley's
Restaurant in Cave Creek.



the entire two years of their lives before being gassed and ground into compost.

"This isn't the world's most natural order in here, I agree," Clint acknowledges. "But I've got to feed 4 million Arizonans and some Hawaiians and everyone else, and I've got to maintain these girls."

And maintained they are. Unlike images from other facilities of manure-plastered, mangy birds pecked bald by their stir-crazed cage mates, Hickman's pearly white leghorns look healthy, coiffed and clean. Stress-reducing practices such as timing the lighting to circadian rhythms and allowing the hens to establish a pecking order within their cages help reduce avian aggression and keep the mortality rate at 2 percent.

The birds nibble on cornmeal and soy, though Clint says that if corn prices rise, they supplement with powdered bovine meat, blood and bone meal ("To me, that's finding a use for the entire animal, just like the Indians did," he says). Instead of the much-maligned traditional method of forced molting - starving older hens for one to two weeks to boost their dwindling egg production - Hickman's gets the same result using a low-calorie feed. The hens are never given hormones and would only be given antibiotics if they became ill. "My chickens haven't gotten sick for 15 years, though," Clint says. "They're basically living in a clean room."

Below each wire cage, a conveyor belt whisks away manure to become compost for local farms and schools, so it doesn't come into contact with the eggs, which roll down the sloped cages onto separate conveyor belts. From there, the eggs go through a \$2 million-dollar series of machines that sort, double wash, UV disinfect and photograph them for imperfections inside and out. Overseeing the process are USDA inspectors that Hickman's voluntarily places in each of its barns.

The setup is so calibrated for food safety that, despite Hickman's having a cage-free facility in cooler California (which provides eggs to some Phoenix restaurants and grocery stores), Clint says, "I will not eat cage-free eggs." Cage-free, he explains, means a barn thick with dusty haze and thousands of chickens spending their entire lives inside, laying eggs on a manure-splattered floor. Because the flock is too large to establish a pecking order, the barn is a battleground with a mortality rate of 50 to 60 percent, he says. "It's a gladiator fight all day, all night. It's madness."

This, plus heat, cost and risk of contamination by disease-carrying rodents are the reasons Hickman's (or any egg farmer) doesn't graze millions of chickens on grassy pastures. "I have compassion for the backyard flock enthusiast who is trying to do right by their animals," he says as we drive away past a Buckeye neighborhood. "I can't do that. I've got to sell to all these people, not just that one house."

On the other side of town and the other side of the spectrum is



Two Wash Ranch, a 5-acre spread nestled into the saguaro and palo verde thickets of New River, north of Cave Creek. It's home to Dave Jordan, aka Dave the Egg Man, a former auto technician who now looks the part of an independent farmer - tan and freckled, wearing a sweat-rimmed baseball cap and a John Deere T-shirt.

"This place is a little piece of heaven for me," he says as we stroll past perfumey herbs and voluptuous vegetables he delivers to a handful of restaurants and the Downtown Phoenix Public Market.

His ducks and geese swim in a pond, while his 300 chickens, peacocks and guinea fowl scamper in several covered, chain link fence enclosures that keep them shielded from wily coyotes. Each is the size of a large bedroom, furnished with roosts and laying nooks. And each houses about 40 chickens - few enough that they can establish a pecking order and live relatively peacefully. A few birds bear battle-scar bald spots, but Dave says he doesn't lose birds to violence - just the occasional heat wave. He says pecking issues might be alleviated if he chose to purchase chickens that have had the tips of their beaks

seared off (a standard practice in conventional hatcheries), but that doesn't jibe with his natural philosophy.

Nor do pesticides, hormones, antibiotics or forced molting. "They eat what they want," he says, tossing the birds alfalfa, which supplements their diet of grain, soy, flax, garden veggies and stray insects - a varied menu that makes pastured eggs significantly lower in cholesterol and higher in nutrients than conventional eggs, according to a 2007 study by *Mother Earth News*.

Every afternoon Dave collects the eggs and washes them with only warm water. USDA requires large commercial egg producers to wash eggs in mild detergent, "but an egg is porous, so I don't know why you would want to eat that," he says.

His hen population has been this large for only about five years, and he hasn't had the heart to slaughter them - yet. "I've got some older birds that are 5, 6 years old. It's not economical to keep them that long, but they're one of my older batches, so it's kind of sentimental."

Dave's motivation is more epicurean than economical. Every month he foots a \$700 feed bill, which he recoups in winter, but in summer the hens drastically reduce their egg output, and he barely scrapes by. As a single father taking care of the farm himself, he says he's leery about approaching new restaurants as customers because he can barely keep up with what he's doing now.

"It's not all about making money," he says. "It's about bringing something to the public and restaurants that is missing out there." Namely, farm-fresh, rich-tasting eggs and veggies. "To hear somebody come back and say, 'Wow, I didn't know it could taste like that.' I notice a lot of older people saying, 'I remember that's what it was like when I was a kid.'"

Butcher Philip Lucas keeps the craft alive at The Meat Shop in Phoenix.



Shops like this are the last morsels of a once-robust, apprentice-supported trade eclipsed by convenience and supermarkets.

worker says, "but it turned into something better." Now, the two-year-old Phoenix butcher shop supplies pork (and Arizona-raised beef) to retail customers and about a dozen local restaurants. It's also the only Valley butcher that raises its pigs locally.

I drive to the farm hoping to find fields of heritage breeds rolling in rained-on soil and rooting for rutabagas. But Tim explains that he can't let the pigs graze openly because they'd take too long to get to market weight and would level the fields in a fortnight. Plus, the Arizona sun is no place for practically hairless, pale animals without sweat glands.

So the 300 Yorkshire and Duroc pigs dwell in a cement-floored, roofed but open-walled building cooled by cross breezes and ceiling sprinklers. The 30-by-15-foot pens offer the pigs - from button-cute piglets to 7-foot-long, thousand-pound breeding hogs with roars that rival a T-Rex - sufficient room for scampering.

"I've liked pigs from when I was really little, and I like being out on the farm," says Tim, who with the help of his family grinds and distributes the pigs' corn-and-soy feed, never adding hormones, antibiotics, rendered animals or unnatural byproducts. One area where Tim remains hands-off is breeding: Unlike industrial facilities, where breeding hogs are constantly chained and regularly artificially inseminated with a rod, Tim just puts a boar in with the sows and lets nature take its course.

The Meat Shop is one of the increasingly rare American businesses that breed, raise, slaughter and sell their own meat. When the pigs reach 6 months old, Tim sends eight per week to the slaughterhouse he owns in Buckeye. On an average day they'll slaughter 55 pigs, sheep and cows - about the same number Smithfield Foods Inc. kills every minute. The smaller number gives them - and the constantly present state inspector - time to ensure every animal is completely stunned before slaughter.

From there, the meat - never frozen or injected with saline water to boost weight, like most pork - goes fresh to The Meat Shop in Downtown Phoenix.

It's a bare-bones but friendly, nostalgic place. On Saturdays, the butchers entertain customers with "a dog and pony show," says butcher Philip Lucas, who learned the trade in his native England and brings a European style and salty banter to the shop. Butchering, he says, "is an art, it's a craft... [but] it's a dying art."

Better Living through Bacon

In his book, *Dominion*, author Matthew Scully visits a North Carolina pig plant owned by the world's largest pork producer, Smithfield Foods Inc., and describes in graphic detail where most U.S. bacon begins.

He wanders through a warehouse where thousands of hysterical hogs crammed so tightly they can't turn around are fattened via automated machines with pellets rich in growth hormones, laxatives, antibiotics and the remains of other pigs. He sees pigs chewing maniacally on their chains. Pigs gnawing nervously on other pigs' purposely half-amputated tails. Pigs collapsed despondently on the metal floor. Pigs with tumors, ulcers, pus pockets, lesions, cysts and fractured limbs.

Yet I find myself at Ahwatukee's Hillside Spot Café, savoring a sublime pulled pork sandwich, knowing it came from perky pigs raised in semi-sunshine in the toast-dry hamlet of Palo Verde, west of Buckeye.

That's where Tim Wilson, owner of The Meat Shop, started raising pigs eight years ago at the request of his daughter. "I thought we would just raise them for our own homegrown meat," the former construction

Tim Wilson, owner of The Meat Shop, raises his pigs near Buckeye using more natural and humane methods than typical industrial pig plants.



Shops like this are the last morsels of a once-robust, apprentice-supported trade eclipsed by convenience and supermarket butchers who "order a box of steaks, let it thaw and put it in the case," says butcher Paul Randolph, who laughingly says he learned most of his skills from YouTube and a DVD called *Ask the Meat Man*.

The Meat Shop gives Phoenixians the rare opportunity to reconnect with the neighborhood meat men, to ask them which cut works best for a recipe, or how to grill London Broil or roast a moist ham.

"A lot of people that come in, they just stand there in awe like, 'Wow, this is what we grew up with,'" Paul says. "They'll come back and say, 'Wow, I was transported back to my childhood because that's what a pork chop is supposed to taste like.'"

The Honest Harvest

We are riding a golf cart around a 25-acre farm teeming with 2,000 citrus trees, Medjool date palms, 150 different herbs and vegetables, and bees alchemizing it into honey. Like the teary-eyed woman we just passed, I find it hard to believe this oasis is sandwiched within a residential subdivision, with the Peoria Sports Complex on the side.

This is McClendon's Select, the biggest name in local, certified organic produce. About 40 Valley restaurants proudly plate its bounty, while other chefs pine away on a waiting list. The fever pitch surrounding its farmers' market fare evokes the Cabbage Patch Kids craze of the 1980s.

Part of the reason is that it's one of only a handful of certified organic farms in the state. In bucolic Oregon and California, so many small growers vie for farmers' market space that "you wouldn't be able to survive without being certified; no one would buy from you," explains Bob McClendon, a workhorse meets teddy bear who runs the business with his wife, Marsha, son Sean and daughter-in-law Kate, plus about 10 other employees.

But in Arizona the once-agricultural land has been turned into tract houses that trail into desert as dry and salty as jerky. That means we have very few small farmers growing very little produce and not generating enough competition or capital to spur them to become certified.

Which might be fine if it weren't for the fact that "there is no regulation whatsoever" at Valley farmers' markets, Bob says, amending that Cindy Gentry, founder of the Downtown Phoenix Public Market, is the only one who vets all of her vendors. "You see people purchasing produce and a lot of times they tell people they grow it or somebody they know grows it, and it's just commercial produce, and it's not organic," Bob says.

He recommends people pepper their veggie vendors with questions. But he says he chose to become USDA organic certified because people trust the highly regulated system. Every year, independent contractors survey his farm, taking soil samples and combing his records to make sure every product he uses has been approved by the Organic Materials Review Institute, an independent nonprofit.

As a certified organic farm, McClendon's does not use any of the 1 billion pounds of pesticides that conventional U.S. farmers spray on their crops annually. Instead, the former pharmacist employs a number of ingenious natural solutions. He points to an employee

spraying the radishes with a beneficial bacteria that's harmless to people but wreaks havoc on the bellies of flea beetles. The wizened weed at our feet was wiped out with concentrated citrus oils. Aphids meet their end at the hand of a sugar ester.

Instead of commercial agriculture's synthetic fertilizers and sewage sludge, composted manure supports both the growth of his produce and local businesses (he gets it from Hickman's and a dairy in Congress, Arizona).

Today, supermarket fruits and vegetables travel an average of 1,500 miles and must often be genetically modified and picked unripe to survive the journey. The result is a lot of timid-tasting tomatoes. But as a local farm, McClendon's can pick its produce fresh and deliver it to restaurants and farmers' markets four times a week. And unlike other small farms, Bob says, McClendon's delivers in refrigerated vehicles that preserve the produce from the withering heat.

Heat is the reason McClendon's does not sell at farmers' markets in the summer. He continues to supply his restaurants, but instead of a bounty that's 90 percent Peoria-grown, he gives them a small supply that's 50 percent from organic farms in southern Arizona and neighboring states.

Every week Bob publishes an availability list that inspires chefs' seasonal menus and even shapes the way we eat in Phoenix. Thanks to a request from Nobuo Fukuda, McClendon's now grows the country's only organic *yuzu*. FnB's Charleen Badman asked him to grow the Italian green *spigarello*, and now it's sweeping the city. His arugula puts the *verde* in Pizzeria Bianco's *biancoverde* pizza, and his squash blossoms have become legendary at Rancho Pinot.

"The things we do to care for our soil... create a product that tastes better than everyone else's," Bob says.

As I drive away from the McClendon's farmers' market stand, I bite into crisp

baby arugula that bites back with a peppery zing, canary-colored summer squash redolent of the sun, and bell peppers bursting with sweet juice that trickles down my chin. Wow, I didn't know vegetables could taste like that.

"You see people purchasing produce and a lot of times they tell people they grow it... and it's just commercial produce."

-Bob McClendon, local organic farmer

A Dairy Home Companion

"Come on, girls! Hi, babies!" she calls. And a congregation of mottled, floppy-eared Nubian goats trots up to the trough, raising their Roman noses toward Rhonda Crow, the effervescent blonde herdswoman who knows every one of her 100 dairy goats by name.

"This is Shelly. She has a twin, so I have to look at her udder. No, it's Brenda. This is Becky, and Judy, and Joanne," Rhonda says as the goats browse on homegrown oat hay and alfalfa from a nearby farm. "I just love them.... They're like a tenth of a cow, with personality."

Rhonda and her husband, Wendell Crow, come from a long line of Arizona dairy farmers. They spent years supplying the Valley with cows' milk and educating visitors through their Crow's Agricultural Learning Facility in Tolleson. Four years ago they sold the farm, moved to a serene, tawny expanse in Buckeye and partnered with their son-in-law, Erik Hernandez, to become the Valley's only farmstead cheesemakers - specifically, goat cheese.

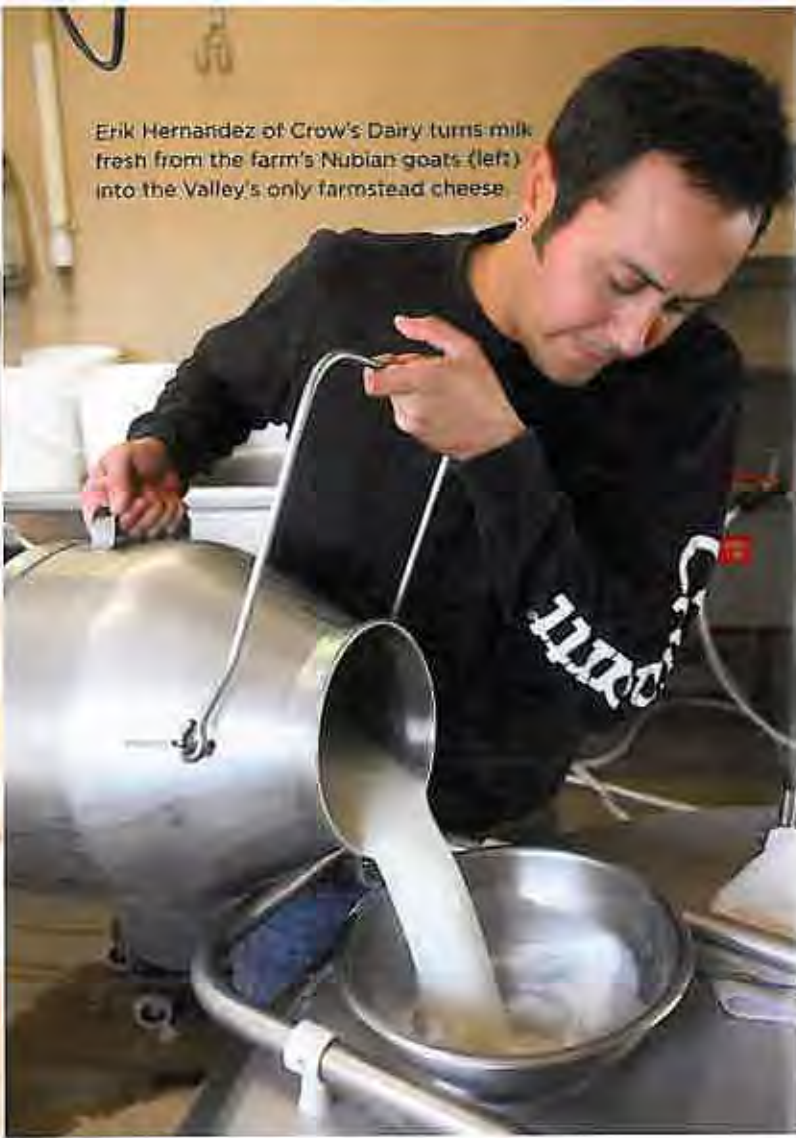
Goats are like soccer - popular everywhere but America - and



Sean McClendon of McClendon's Select, one of the state's only certified organic farms, works the Town & Country Farmers Market.



Erik Hernandez of Crow's Dairy turns milk fresh from the farm's Nubian goats (left) into the Valley's only farmstead cheese.



the cheese culture in Arizona is as solid as a squiggle of Velveeta. But Crow's Dairy is quickly winning over farmers' market customers and about twenty local restaurants with their feta, quark and chevre, which Phoenix restaurateur and *Iron Chef America* winner Mark Tarbell says has the "punch, complexity and balance" he's been searching for since he lived in France.

The secret is freshness. "Goat milk is very, very fragile," explains Rhonda. At larger factories, milk from a dozen or more dairies streaks through pipelines, sloshes for miles in trucks, then splashes into a communal vat - all the while breaking and releasing a musky acid that tastes like licking a yak.

"The farthest our milk travels is from where Rhonda's standing to the other side of that door," says Erik, pointing from the pump where Rhonda milks the goats twice a day to the room five steps away where he and Wendell make the cheese several times a week. Every Friday, Wendell delivers the cheese to restaurants Valleywide, though they've been known to swoop in midweek to save a chef from a shortage of chevre.

"There could be instances where it was milk, and then 72 hours later it's on someone's plate in a restaurant. That's how fast we can get it out there," Erik says.

And, adds Rhonda, "If we go in and perhaps they haven't used a

pound or two of our cheese, we'll replace it with new cheese at no charge. Because if our product is quality, they're going to want it."

Despite starting during the recession, Crow's Dairy has seen only growth in business. They'd like to expand, but Rhonda says she wouldn't be able to memorize more than 300 goats' names, so she doesn't want to get so big that the goats have to go by numbers. "I want to keep some of that family farm feel."

Watching the Crows tend to their animals, it would seem a shame to switch to the impersonal numbers and industrial facilities of agribusiness. And yet, factory farms mean millions of people fed, dollars saved for families on food stamps, and time spared for busy parents by trips to the supermarket. "These factory farms feed the world, and we've got to give them their due," Rhonda says. "But the family farms feed communities and keep the lifestyle going."

It is a dilemma: As a desert, Arizona cannot produce enough lovingly raised homegrown food to feed millions. But our small local farms can feed Phoenicians something that's often missing from conventional agriculture: fresh, healthy, humane, eco-friendly food that makes people say, "Wow, this is how it's supposed to taste."

— Keridwen Cornelius can be reached at kcornelius@citieswestpub.com.

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Want a second helping?

For a list of restaurants and markets that offer these farmers' foods, as well as more photos of the Valley's locally grown meat, eggs, produce and cheese, visit phoenixmag.com/extras.



Clockwise from top left: feta, bacon chèvre, natural chèvre, peppercorn feta