

Cave Creek restaurateurs turn to desert for menu ideas

by **Carey Sweet** - May. 15, 2010 11:28 AM
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Two Cave Creek restaurants are again celebrating the bounty of the desert, filling their larders with freshly plucked indigenous jewels like prickly pear, jojoba seeds, mesquite beans and saguaro fruit.

Eric Flatt, owner of Cartwright's Sonoran Ranch House & Lounge downtown, and the eclectic Arizona-themed Tonto Bar & Grill down the road at Rancho Mañana, both boast pantries brimming with uncommon [game](#) meat, garden-fresh produce and Native American delicacies.

During the last weekend in April, Flatt, Cartwright's chef Montez Crane and Tonto chef Aaron Geister headed out to the desert for an "extreme locavore" expedition, culling ingredients from the restaurant properties and nearby private desert areas.

Trading chef's whites for hiking boots, the trio pick ocotillo flowers and cholla buds from cactus, with Geister later tossing the blossoms into a special salad that also included wild arugula with toasted pepitas and julienne jicama in lime-mesquite honey vinaigrette.

The idea is to let guests experience flavors that connect with the restaurants' Sonoran setting. Later [summer](#) harvests will include cat's claw, purported to have disease-fighting properties, but more useful to Flatt's chefs as a flavor enhancer when the plant blooms for a week or two each year.

"We'll use the flowers to finish meats," Flatt explained. "They put out a perfumed smoke."

Jojoba beans are tasty right out of the husk and are similar to raw almonds. Mesquite beans can be nibbled as-is or ground into flour

that is used to dust seafood dishes and for baking. They also make a rich syrup or can be toasted as a toss-in for salads.

Prickly pear and saguaro fruit have slightly tart pulp, like rhubarb or cranberries, and can be made into jams, candy, syrup, salsas and barbecue sauce.

Flatt's chefs use the fruits as garnishes on entrees, and in the Indian Harvest Torta on Tonto's menu, which layers braised Anasazi beans, tomatoes, ancho-chile goat cheese, sundried tomatillo relish and palm dates from the restaurant's own trees on "ancient" three-grain flat bread.

Throughout the summer, saguaro fruit will be showcased in some appetizers, Flatt says, and saguaro seeds will be dried and used like poppy seeds on salads and in breads.

Other past [recipes](#) have included prickly pear and sour crema cheesecake with tequila-marinated berries and citrus sauce of juice from Arizona groves.

Exact dishes this year will be up to nature and opportunity.

"We do not put any of our harvested items on the regular menu as we never know how long they will last," Flatt said. "And there is a lot of trial-and-error work we do, such as ocotillo flowers. We are freezing some to see how they come out. We are drying some to see if we can use them in teas or pastas. Sometimes products, although edible, just don't come out right."

The harvest is time consuming for a restaurant entrepreneur, but Flatt makes it into a favorite family pastime. His wife and son are regular companions on his explorations. Flatt's said his 7-year-old son, Jake, can name almost every plant in the desert.

Details: Cartwright's, 6710 E. Cave Creek Road, 480-488-8031, cartwrightssonoranranchhouse.com. Tonto Bar & Grill, 5736 E. Rancho Mañana Blvd., 480-488-0698. tontobarandgrill.com.