

Hot Stops

Taste the spice along Arizona's Salsa Trail. —By Jackie Dishner

Outside the San Simon Chile Company in Safford, Arizona, two automatic roasters send piquant smoke into the air about 20 yards from the road. Owner Jane Wyatt mans a nearby picnic table that holds neatly arranged jars of homemade salsas and jellies, and bowls of fresh green jalapeños and sundried reds. They're the backbone ingredients of this region's cuisine and the hallmark of Arizona's Salsa Trail.

Located in the state's southeast corner, the trail primarily follows the Old West Highway (Highway 70), but also loops and branches into three back roads, to 13 restaurants, one tortilla factory and the chile company. It takes a long weekend to dip a chip at all the stops since the drive traverses three counties and eight communities.

From Phoenix, the tour begins in Pima, a tiny town where cotton farms and alfalfa fields replace cactus and sage. The lone, sit-down restaurant there, Bush & Shurtz, serves farmers who prefer their salsa creamy and mild, but in the next town over, Thatcher, La Casita Café makes a chunky, spicy salsa sold by the pint. It's a tongue-burning, tear-jerking green concoction worth taking home.

Just four miles east, Safford serves as the hub of the salsa trail thanks to six culinary venues that dish up Mexican fare. El Coronado serves their Huevos Rancheros Burro with a salsa thin enough to drink and Mi Casa Tortilla Factory offers soft, warm and chewy tortillas—flour

and corn—hot off the griddle. They're even great for breakfast.

York, on the far east end of the trail, boasts Gi'mee's, one of those blink-and-you-might-miss-it spots. But travelers know the restaurant for its chiles rellenos, which taste like sweet-and-spicy, cheese-covered crêpes.

"This region has always been a chile-eating valley," says Wyatt, as she watches her chiles slowly tumble inside the round, grated drums of her metal roasters. As the peppers toss and turn, their long, green edges catch the heat, spitting out sizzling oils that sometimes flare into temporary flames. It's a reminder that one daring sample of a raw jalapeño may require cream cheese on a cracker—not water—to tame the burn. And when travelers arrive in Willcox, often the last trail stop, they feel they've earned a T-shirt that says, "I survived." ●

A variety of salsas, tortillas and other Mexican fare make the Salsa Trail a hot destination.

