

# Wild Arizona

*With the opening of The Table at Junipine, chefs Brett Vibber and Jaren Bates return to their roots*

BY REBECCA L. RHOADES



**W**“We always tell people that you have to know the rules in order to break the rules,” says Brett Vibber.

As co-owners of one of Arizona’s most highly anticipated, most celebrated, and most innovative restaurants of the past year, Vibber and his partner, Jaren Bates - both formally trained chefs - have tossed out the rulebook on classic comfort cuisine and are applying their own idiosyncratic blend of techniques and flavors.

Whether they’re serving up little-known products from local purveyors, experimenting with new ways to use heritage foods, or foraging for wild ingredients in the high desert, the duo takes a hyper-local approach that showcases indigenous foodways and spotlights the Grand Canyon State’s native bounty.

It’s a culinary bricolage. And it’s at the heart of every

dish served at The Table at Junipine.

## **A DELICIOUS REINVENTION**

The Table is the on-site eatery at Junipine Resort, a secluded, idyllic condo complex on the shores of Oak Creek, about 10 miles north of downtown Sedona. While the restaurant itself has been around for a number of years, it had undergone numerous management changes and never really found its footing in the mystical destination’s vibrant culinary scene.

In August 2022, Vibber and Bates took over the property, keeping the name but bringing their distinctive freewheeling touch to the menu.

The two chefs have been working together since 2007. Arizona foodies will recognize their names from longtime Cave Creek staple Cartwright's Modern Cuisine, which closed in December 2019. The pair had hoped to open a new brick-and-mortar restaurant by fall 2020, but then the pandemic hit. So they pivoted and formed WILD Arizona Cuisine, a private chef business that offered everything from intimate high-end catering to large-scale humanitarian relief. But the desire to have their own establishment remained.

"When Grace Hospitality approached us and said they had this spot, it was sort of like a dream come true," Vibber says. "We never even looked in Oak Creek because it would have taken millions to buy or build something. So we were able to put in this concept that we had been talking about — and other people had been waiting for — for years."

From the menu to the style of service to the cocktails, the restaurant is the culmination of decades of ideas, many of which were incubated at WILD. "We're taking our experiences and foundations learned and applying them with things that are in our hearts and souls and from our families," Vibber notes.

The dishes are deeply rooted in time and place. "A few years ago, [a local newspaper] did an article on a few different chefs who were embracing what Arizona actually is through local purveyors or local growers," Vibber says. "They called it 'new Arizona cuisine.' I just call it 'Arizona cuisine.'"

There are chickens from Mountain Sky Farms in Scottsdale and Iberico pork from Terra Farm in Prescott. Onions, watercress, mushrooms, crab apples, acorns and spruce tips are foraged from the surrounding landscape. Indigenous heritage crops are

transformed into gourmet fare. Tepary beans become hummus, cassoulet and miso; steam corn is blended into custard and cake icing.

"We don't have to go out of our region to find everything we need for the restaurant," Vibber says. "Someone makes dishware in Arizona. Someone grows flowers in Arizona. Someone makes candles in Arizona. It's not necessarily always about the food. But we do know everyone who grows anything that's put on our plates. They are relationships that we've built over the course of time."

## RENEWING ANCESTRAL INGREDIENTS

Bates' appreciation for the Southwest's native ingredients and the stories they tell is ingrained in his ancestry. The chef, who is Diné, grew up on a farm in the Four Corners region of the Navajo Nation. After a knee injury ended a promising football career, he moved to Phoenix to attend culinary school.

"As far as being Native American, I still keep with the traditions when it comes to cooking food and developing the flavors I grew up with," Bates says. "But I want to put my own touch on it. And I want to make it more palatable to the masses."

He points to the restaurant's Mesquite Honey Cake, which comes with steam corn ice cream. "I grew up with steam corn, but it was normally used just in stews and soups," he says. Steam corn is a Navajo white corn that is steamed in underground pits. It has a rich, smoky-

sweet flavor with deep earthy notes. "Family and friends who know the flavor and try the dessert tell me that never in a thousand years would they have thought about turning our traditional ingredient into ice cream. But I managed to do that in a way that still



keeps our story and customs alive.”

Then there are tepary beans. These nutritious legumes are native to the Sonoran Desert and have been a staple of Native American cuisine for thousands of years. Drawing on his training in Asian cooking, Bates transforms teparies into a puree similar to Japanese red bean paste. “I found a way to actually imitate the flavor of chocolate, but there’s no chocolate in it,” he says. The tepary bean paste is served on sweet corn biscuits.

Bates is one of a growing nationwide coterie of Native chefs who have left the reservation, received formal culinary training, and are now combining their modern-day skills with centuries of cultural tradition to create leading-edge, award-winning cuisine.

“Being able to tell not just my story but also my family’s story through our food is very empowering,” he says. “When you try tepary beans or steam corn, you’re tasting a story that has been dormant for a while and is now being disseminated across the nation. These ingredients have been passed down from generation to generation.

## FOREST TO PLATE

While many of the staple food items used by Vibber and Bates come from local farmers and gardeners, they’re elevated by the chefs’ addition of foraged wild ingredients. This not only reflects an indigenous way of eating, but also fosters an appreciation of the bold flavors and diverse abundance of Mother Nature.

“No matter where you are in the world, you should eat things that are grown or are growing close to you,” Vibber says. “Before we cultivated foods, people ate the plants that were growing in the areas in which they lived. So it’s not some crazy trend. It’s the way it’s always been.”

Whenever they’re not in the kitchen, Vibber and Bates can be found gathering fresh seasonal fruits, vegetables, flowers, and other vegetation in areas across the state. Saguaro and barrel cactus fruit are used to make gastriques for cocktails, syrups, and caramels. The seeds of the fruit are added to

baked goods for a nutritious crunch.

“We honor the whole plant,” Vibber notes. “Sometimes we harvest things for their buds. Sometimes we harvest them for their leaves. And sometimes we harvest them for their fruits or vegetables.”

When the weather begins to warm up, the chefs gather wild rapini, London rocket, and hedge mustard. Soon it will be the season for morel and lobster mushrooms, wild onions, watercress, palo verde seeds, and ocotillo flowers. Excess harvest is preserved for year-round use through a variety of methods, including dehydrating, powdering, canning, smoking, and salting.

A new spring favorite is spruce tips, the tender new growth that appears at the end of branches. When harvested just after emerging from their protective sheaths, the tips are sweet with floral and citrus notes. In the last couple of years, Vibber and Bates have used the tips to make vinegar, fried them, and used them as a topping on tartares. The first potsticker dish at The Table was filled with wild mushrooms and sat on a wild spruce emulsion. “We found it to be a very versatile wild food and highly accessible,” Vibber says. “You’re not going to over-harvest spruce tips.”

When collecting wild ingredients, the duo follows a specific rule of thumb: “We forage by threes. Take a






third for ourselves, leave a third for nature to eat, and leave a third to propagate,” Vibber explains.

Bates elucidates, “Respecting the land also means taking care of it. Because at the end of the day, if you don’t treat it the way it needs to be treated, there aren’t going to be any more fruits for us to eat or animals for us to hunt — and we’re not going to have a place to live anymore. Take a little here and there, and then move on to another spot.”

The Table at Junipine has been open only eight months, but it’s already receiving nationwide recognition. In January, Vibber and Bates were named as semifinalists for the prestigious James Beard Award for Best Chef: Southwest.

“Good food doesn’t have to be high-end with 17 wine glasses on the table and having to know which fork you’re going to pick up first. If it’s good food, then it’s good food,” Vibber concludes. “We’re driven by a passion for sharing something with people, and our platform just happens to be food. We’re just one part of the story.”

For more, visit [www.junipine.com/sedona-dining](http://www.junipine.com/sedona-dining). 

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