

Food, Community, Justice

BY GARY PAUL NABHAN

Sometimes referred to as “the father of the local food movement,” Slow Money Institute board member Gary Nabhan reflects upon community-based food relocalization in Tucson, Arizona. Gary farms an orchard of 150 heirloom fruit varieties in Patagonia, Arizona, ten miles north of the Mexican border.



On December 11, 2015, UNESCO designated Tucson, Arizona, as the first “City of Gastronomy” in the US. That day, Tucson’s Mayor Jonathan Rothschild agreed to join 115 other metro areas in 54 countries as members of the Creative Cities Network sponsored by the United Nations.

Rothschild linked the honor to the 4,100-year history of food production in the Tucson Basin—the oldest continuous agricultural tradition in any metro area in the US. But he also suggested that this distinction could become one more means that the city’s Poverty Commission and Food Commission could use to reduce the prevailing poverty and food insecurity in the community.

His audience cheered. They needed some good news. Tucson lagged behind other cities in recovering from the Great Recession and had been beleaguered by tragic events such as the assassination attempt on US Congresswoman Gabby Giffords. Tucsonans thirsted for something to celebrate. At last, they were in the national and international spotlight for something positive.

And yet, as the initial excitement subsided, many Tucsonans found that the phrase “City of Gastronomy” did not roll very easily off their tongues.

“What does that mean we are?” they asked. A city of gourmets and gourmands? A city of food cultures? A city with a unique food history? A food city?

At the Food Justice Forum where the mayor launched Tucson’s role in the UNESCO network, one Chicana activist had the candor to ask, “How will the dishwasher in a fast food restaurant feel any different about what she or he does because of this designation?”

That question was well put. In fact, Tucsonans had been struggling to get their local food system back on the course of food justice and

sustainability ever since the triple whammy of the Great Recession, the subprime mortgage scandal, and Arizona's rancorous immigration debate had ravaged its economy.

But that may have been the very reason that UNESCO temporarily bypassed applications from better-known "food cities" like Portland, Seattle, and New Orleans. Tucson had begun to use its community food innovations—often emerging from the bottom up—as means to reduce its poverty and high public-health costs, to create green jobs, to divert still-edible food out of the waste stream, and to celebrate the unique multicultural food traditions of the US/Mexico borderlands.

What Tucson's many small-scale food and farming entrepreneurs had expressed in their letters of support for the UNESCO designation was not that they had already fixed all the city's social, economic, and nutritional problems. Such problems had been plaguing Old Pueblo and other borderland cities for years. Instead, they had demonstrated that innovations in any community often begin on the margins of its power structure before they gain traction as others join in the problem solving. After these innovations have achieved a certain modicum of success, they are often "blessed" and financially supported by the civic organizations and leaders of the city, so that they can spread more rapidly within and beyond the community.

In 2008, Tucson was the second poorest metro area in the 12 Western states and was ranked by various surveys as either the sixth or the eighth poorest city in the entire country. Just how Tucson became so mired in poverty and food insecurity, childhood obesity, and adult-onset diabetes is a story unto itself. One short answer is that the 2008 subprime mortgage meltdown had its epicenter in Arizona, triggering the loss of tens of thousands of jobs throughout the state just before the Great Recession rocked the entire nation. The Grand Canyon State's economy was so gutted that immigrant farm workers reversed the direction of their migrations, heading back into Mexico to find greener pastures.

Both home construction and tourism income—once steady sources of employment in Arizona—dried up, reducing the number of jobs in related service industries. The Tucson Cooperative Warehouse—which had been Arizona's only food hub—abruptly closed shop in 2008 and released its staff of 65. It had previously been grossing \$12 million a year, but could not pencil out profits anymore, even though it had been supplying natural foods to Tucson-area buying clubs, health stores, and co-ops for 34 years.

The unemployment rate in Tucson went from five percent in January 2008 to 11.1 percent in January 2010. Its unemployment rate among the civilian labor force peaked in 2014 at 12.2 percent, and a fourth of the households in the city fell below the poverty level. As such economic woes were compounded by wars over immigration and drugs, it is estimated that the number of food-insecure Tucson residents rose four percent a year, ultimately growing to more than 156,000 individuals.

But that was not the worst of it. A third of those whose low incomes or unemployment qualified them for food relief did not file for federal assistance.

Why? Because if a low-income household harbored even a single undocumented Mexican-born relative, the family often opted not to request any food relief tied to state or federal funding, worried that a paper trail might lead to his or her incarceration or deportation.

As a result of such disparities in access, the Tucson-based Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona witnessed a 22-percent spike in demand in 2008 alone. As its staff was pressed to distribute as many as 24 million meals per year, they became convinced of the need to invest in longer-term solutions to food security. They brought in a new CEO, Michael McDonald, who observed, “We’d experienced four decades of trying to *feed people out of poverty and hunger*, but it wasn’t working. We decided that we’ve got to grow our way toward more sustainable solutions, out of hunger, and into food security.”

McDonald and his staff jumped feet-first into seeking more entrepreneurial solutions to the food insecurity plaguing the Tucson community. Its Caridad Community Kitchen began training dozens of unemployed Tucsonans each year in culinary skills, rather than just serving them meals. Their graduates began landing jobs throughout the community in schools, food wagons, and small restaurants. Within two miles of the downtown area, the *Las Milpitas de Cottonwood* community garden morphed into something akin to a new farm incubator. And rather than simply touching base with social justice activists who lived in Tucson’s seven poverty-stricken food deserts, it brought several of them on staff to extend their programs across cultural, racial, and class lines.

What began to happen next was—in my mind, at least—what actually made Tucson, its tortilla makers, gardeners, gleaners, and even its dishwashers deserving of being honored as part of the global network of



Las Milpitas de Cottonwood

UNESCO “Cities of Gastronomy.” The community could not wait for the government, foundations, or universities to get its food system back on track, so instead it found novel ways to fund and implement—from the grassroots—a series of striking innovations to feed its community members.

When I moved back into one of South Tucson’s barrios around 2010, the first thing that struck me was that no one seemed to go to Taco Bell, Señor Taco, or McDonald’s any longer. Catty-corner to these fast-food franchises, there always seemed to be a *kimchi* taco truck, a Sonoran hot dog (*dogero*) cart, or a *Santa Maria* barbecue wagon offering fresher, more savory fare for half to two-thirds the price of a Happy Meal.

By 2011, Tucson and its Pima County suburbs had 12 times the number of mobile food services as New York City. At one point, some 941 nomadic food entrepreneurs were roaming around the county, some registered with the city, some not. As many as 235 full-service food carts, 45 *dogero* pushcarts, and 85 nomadic caterers stationed themselves along the dusty streets of Tucson and the roughly paved rural routes coming into the metro area.

Many of these food wagons and pushcarts got built in the backyards of men and women who had recently lost their salaried jobs. They combined the remains of their savings from better years with that of a few relatives,

built out a food truck, and secured permits for less than \$25,000 a unit. They then took *La Abuela's* most beloved family recipes to the streets.

Pima County was soon competing with Los Angeles County for the highest ratio of food trucks to residents in the US, with roughly one vehicle offering food on the fly for every thousand residents.

And yet, keep this in mind: government-compiled statistics can somewhat capture the changes in numbers of registered food trucks using certified commercial kitchens, but they wholly miss another phenomenon that uses food to help Tucson community members to recover economically. This somewhat hidden, ad hoc community development strategy was revealed to me one day as I sat in the lobby of a garage, waiting to have my tires replaced. As I fidgeted in the midday heat, I became thirsty and a bit hungry. Before I could get up to venture out on the street to find a light lunch and beverage, lunch came to me, my mechanic, and my sales clerk in the form of burritos and tacos. One Mexican-American woman offered us meals while her neighbor and driver provided *horchata* and *jamaica* beverages out of coolers stashed in the trunk of their shared Chevy sedan.

Once I had been exposed to this other form of “street food,” I began to notice women hovering by the doors of bookstores with buckets of tamales and men going door-to-door with knapsacks full of borderland specialty foods. Over the following months, I realized that an informal and almost-clandestine food economy had spread its roots from the border town of Nogales into Tucson and all the way up to Phoenix.

Entire extended families were helping one another salvage, glean, or purchase—at discount prices—various seasonal vegetables and other ingredients from produce brokers at the border. They took these windfalls home and combined them with other ingredients for burritos, tacos, *caldos*, *sopas*, and *casuelas*. They loaded the food into coolers and drove around to businesses, parks, and plazas where people from all walks of life were gathered, and then sold them for cash on paper plates or in paper bowls. No overhead, no permits, no taxes, no advertising, and no paper trail.

No wonder Taco Bell and McDonald's appeared nearly empty during lunch hours. Good homemade food—from paella to seasonally savored green corn tamales—could be delivered to you for less than four dollars a meal; you just needed to know where to look for it. As I learned how and where to look for such treasures, I was able to purchase mesquite tortillas,

mescal, acorns, and *chiltepins* (wild chiles) out of the trunks of neighbors' sedans and vans.

Innovations had begun not only on the production side of the food sector, but on the waste reduction side as well. Some of the women who sold soups and salsas out of the trunks of their cars began to source their ingredients from two rather “scrappy” and resourceful initiatives: Market on the Move and Produce on Wheels—With Out Waste.

These two food justice efforts rescue huge quantities of soon-to-spoil produce. As “lean-and-mean” and food redistributors, they haul rescued produce up from Nogales in semis, and then park their trucks in dozens of church parking lots in the “food deserts” of Tucson and other towns, where they offer 60 pounds of vegetables for \$10 to anyone who arrives in time to get in on the action.

Produce on Wheels had also developed synergies with the Tohono O’odham Tribe’s San Xavier Co-op and the University of Arizona’s student Compost Cats. In less than five years, this collaboration has recycled more than 10.4 million pounds of green waste into organic compost now used by local gardeners and farmers. As many as 60 students and another dozen tribal members are now employed part-time in producing and marketing the second largest source of locally produced compost in the Tucson Basin.



Produce on Wheels—With Out Waste

The student group also started a food pantry on campus, primarily for other students and staff who live below the poverty level.

It was another champion of composting who blazed new trails in Tucson by expanding markets and creating new jobs along the way. His name was Jason Tankersley, and he cranked up the capture and transformation of green waste in southern Arizona to a level previously unimaginable in the region. Soon his immensely rich organic compost and four other soil amendments were available at more than 50 hardware stores, nonprofit gift shops, and community gardens in Tucson.

Less than a decade before Tankersley and Compost Cats began their blessed ferment, virtually all bags of compost sold in Tucson were brought in by railroad cars from Ohio! Both gardeners and farmers stood amazed as Tank's Green Stuff increased the water-holding capacity and fertility of their soils, allowing both the yields and flavor of desert fruits and vegetables to reach new levels.

That rather sudden access to locally produced inputs for food production may seem trivial until you realize that southern Arizona farmers and ranchers had previously been spending more than \$200 million each year to purchase soil amendments, weed and pest control measures, seeds, farm tools, biofuels, and other soil enhancers from sources outside the state.



Jason Tankersley

Several years before, community food economist Ken Meter of the Crossroads Resource Center warned Arizona farmers of the high cost of their addiction to outside inputs: “The region lost, even if a few individual [agribusinesses] thrived. For me, this fact reinforced the economic value of producing fertility and machinery in your own foodshed.”

Whether through food wagons or compost sales, Tucson’s food economy had begun to reinvent itself in ways that government statistics could hardly document, let alone track over time. As social theorists Kenneth Boulding and Immanuel Wallerstein laid out decades ago as a fundamental principle, most innovation tends to happen on the peripheries of society. Such innovations only later get adopted and refined—or, in worst cases, co-opted—in the hallowed halls of well-endowed institutions.

Marginalized Arizonans, especially underemployed Tucsonans, had independently discovered that same principle. Around 2001, before their food business startups began to flourish, Arizona had a rather mediocre ranking (ninth) among all states in the entrepreneurial index of the Kauffman Foundation. But *after* the Recession hit, Arizona surged. Rather suddenly, the Grand Canyon State was ranked at the top, tied with California for the highest entrepreneurial rating among all states in the nation. In Kauffman’s newer, more comprehensive Index of Growth Entrepreneurship, Arizona was ranked in the top three among the 25 states surveyed in 2016.

The drivers of this entrepreneurial surge in Tucson and in other metro areas in the borderlands are not difficult to identify. It seems that recent immigrants (many of whom were born in Mexico) are starting many of the new businesses in the US these days. Their efforts accounted for 28.5 percent of all startups nationwide in 2014—increasing from 25.9 percent in 2013—and more than double their contribution in 1997.

This last year, the Kauffman Index of Startup Activity revealed a remarkable level of activity among Latinos (including Mexican-Americans born in this country). Their share of new businesses created across the country increased from 20.4 percent in 2013 to 22.1 percent in 2014. It is therefore not surprising that the single most important force moving Tucson’s food system in new directions is the Mexican-American community, as it is in other metro areas of the borderlands. All across the US, 91 percent of all Latino businesses are family-owned, compared with 85 percent of non-Latino businesses.

Tucson's food community is also being enriched by refugees from more than 30 other countries. These recent immigrants hone and adapt their already-sophisticated food procurement and business skills through the Iskashitaa Refugee Network. Working with founder Barbara Eiswerth, they identify, harvest, glean, process, and redistribute more than 50 tons of produce annually, assisting a diverse range of underserved families across southern Arizona in their efforts to bolster their nutrition. Another 50 tons of fruit are harvested from local farms, backyards, and street medians to be prepared as value-added products, which are sold by the refugees themselves at farmers' markets and other community events.

All over Tucson, you can see individuals, friends, and families building small food businesses with their sweat equity and tenacity, usually with no funding or technical assistance from any agencies.

And that's where Local First Arizona, led by its charismatic founder, Kimber Lanning, comes in. They are not only providing technical, managerial, and marketing guidance to independently owned food startups, they are also convincing social-venture organizations that it's time for them to lend a hand. Now, thanks to the annual Arizona Food and Farm Finance Forum hosted by Local First Arizona and the University of Arizona Center for Regional Food Studies, young entrepreneurs have a venue where they find both mentors and slow money investors who may be able to help them through the rough spots.

Their rationale is straightforward: supporting independently owned local businesses in Tucson contributes to the economic well-being of the entire community. Local First Arizona has calculated that 73 cents of every dollar spent at independently owned businesses stays in the community, compared with only 43 cents of every dollar spent at nationally franchised food businesses.

There's a certain irony to all of this. While few economists or community development wonks were even paying attention, Tucsonans initiated a wide array of entrepreneurial activities with very little initial capital. Tucson's number of food-related-business startups began to soar even before the local economy as a whole began to recover. Or more to the point, these food businesses have likely fueled some of the economic recovery that has taken place in the community.

On a broader scale, food and beverage businesses appear to be playing a pivotal role in fostering Arizona's economic recovery relative to what was

happening in adjacent states. By 2015, the National Restaurant Association placed Arizona in the lead among all states with 2015 restaurant sales of \$11.5 billion and 273,700 restaurant jobs. Currently, its restaurant sales are almost three times that of New Mexico, a state of roughly the same size and same level of agricultural productivity.

Drop back down to the metro level and the importance of the food sector to Tucson's economy is writ large. As the city's historic preservation officer Jonathan Mabry recently discovered about Tucson's food sector:

There are more than 1,200 restaurants and drinking establishments, which employ more than 30,000 people; when grocery stores are included, food businesses provide 14 percent of all jobs in the city. Of the total number of restaurants and bars in the city, almost two-thirds (63 percent) are locally owned, non-chain businesses. This high rate of local ownership (the 2010 census says that only 41 percent of all US restaurants are locally owned) is good news for our economy . . .

After the closures of more than 50 of Tucson's restaurants immediately following the 2008 crash, a new generation of independently owned eateries has emerged to become the drivers of what locals now call "the Downtown Renaissance."

Of the 30 locally sourcing dining establishments now found in Tucson, a dozen of these innovative restaurants and bars have taken over historic properties in the Old Pueblo's downtown. In fact, a few of them are within spitting distance of 3,500-year-old irrigation ditches, fields, and gardens that underlie the Old Pueblo. Their names won't mean much to people who don't live in Tucson, but most of their monikers reflect the uniqueness of the desert borderlands. Several of these new restaurants have joined forces to share the costs of transporting and procuring fruits, meats, and vegetables from local farms and ranches.

Rather than seeing each other as competitors, these young businesswomen and men get that they are all in it together. Many of them are also sourcing their vinegars and fruits from Iskashitaa Refugee Network, their mesquite-smoked whiskey from Hamilton Distillers and its new barley-malting floor, or their breads from Barrio Bread and its Bread Without Borders program, all nested in their own backyard.

This kind of cross-sector collaboration is what sociologist Brian Mayer—a leading member of the Mayor’s Poverty Commission—sees as essential for any community to ultimately deal head-on with poverty and food insecurity. It can’t just be a governmental effort, or one funded by a generous and compassionate local philanthropist. The food bank can’t do it alone, nor can an enlightened business community. All those threads must come together to weave a tangible safety net for those most marginalized by the conventional food system. Thanks to Brian Mayer’s critical look at poverty-reduction strategies in cities such as Tucson, I’ve become convinced that for such a safety net to have staying power, it must be woven from the bottom up.

Regardless of whether the honorific designation from UNESCO as a City of Gastronomy significantly makes such work easier to accomplish, Tucson and its citizens are continuing to improvise new structures that will potentially provide such a safety net for the poorest of the poor in their midst. Their success is by no means a done deal; you can still see the hurt and hunger in the eyes of a third of all Tucsonans.

Yet, I find solace and hope in the words of Chris Bianco, one of the award-winning chefs who has been most engaged with small growers and nonprofits in the region. I think Chris captures the feeling shared by many in Tucson about how such collaborative work changes more than just what we see on our dinner plate:

You know, what has changed my life is the daily act, filled with best intentions, of working with all of these people—farmers, ranchers, millers, cheesemakers, tomato canners—for they have become more than mere suppliers, they have become friends.

This metaphor of relationship now extends to everyone who touches or is touched by our food. By reaching out to affect our neighbors, and being affected by them . . . that momentous act keeps building, building, building until it rises up like a leavened ball of dough to become our whole world.

Gary Paul Nabhan is the director of the Center for Regional Food Studies at the University of Arizona. His latest books are Ethnobiology for the Future: Linking Cultural and Ecological Diversity, and The Canelo Project. He is on the Tucson Commission on Food Security, Heritage, and Economy, and the boards of Slow Money Institute and the Borderlands Habitat Network.