

Taylor Sanders — Compost Cats

When the pile of decomposing food waste hits a ripe, steamy 131 degrees, **Taylor Sanders** can't help but feel satisfied. She and the rest of the University of Arizona's Compost Cats have taken millions of pounds of organic waste that would have stunk up a landfill and turned it into something capable of teasing food out of our arid soil.

There's something about the nature of decomposition that draws Sanders to it, how food potentially contaminated by pathogens and pesticide residue is "cooked" down to a nutrient rich substance because of naturally occurring microbial processes.

As Sanders puts it, "Microbes will be microbes." She just helps them along a little bit.



Learning how to drive a tractor was one of her most euphoric moments in Compost Cats. In control of the machine, surrounded by rows of waste, and manure from the Reid Park Zoo, Sanders ignores the stench, turns the compost and adds water. Here, surveying the compost from a tractor at the San Xavier Co-op Farm, Sanders says she learned she could be a leader and change what Tucsonans do with their food waste.

"It's early mornings, it's a lot of picking trash out of goopy food waste that's rotting and smelling, and flies are everywhere," Sanders says. "We wouldn't be doing this if we didn't think we were making a difference."

O'odham Ladies

Alice Juan makes the fry bread dough. Her granddaughter **Jessica Arellano-Juan** does the beans. **Veronica Harvey** prepares the chili. Her sister **Lorinda Harvey** mans the front of the booth, taking orders and distributing food to hungry customers at Tucson Meet Yourself. Together, they call themselves the O'odham Ladies.

"As soon as we get there, nobody says anything, because we know what to do," Juan said. "We just know what needs to be done and it's done."

Operating solely on women power, the O'odham Ladies have been sharing their native foods with curious eaters for almost 40 years, with no plans to stop. Introducing people to their chili and fry bread, also called popovers, is too good a feeling to quit.

Last year at TMY, Lorinda Harvey convinced a man who didn't like beef to try their food. After a taste, he promptly declared it the best beef he'd ever had.

"He just made me feel really good," she said. "You're constantly on your feet, it's hot, you're covered in grease, but when people appreciate your food and tell you nice things... that just makes us want to keep on."

The O'odham Ladies also don't shy away from trying others' food at TMY, whether it's the bananas fried by monks or the Greek yellow lamb.

"It (the lamb) just looked weird, and we were like, 'What is it?'" Arellano-Juan said. "But we got it and it was good."

"And I'm sure they were thinking the same thing about us, like, 'What are they doing over there, they've got their hands in the flour!' Juan added. "We're all kind of curious, but you gotta try each other's food."



Heritage, health and heart

Festivals, groups, 4,000-year agricultural history link Tucson's food system

Chad Borseth — Native Seeds/SEARCH

Through seeds, **Chad Borseth** has become more connected to the earth — both past and present.

A self-professed plant nerd, Borseth began buying from Native Seeds/SEARCH in the mid-90s, and joined its team three years ago as the assistant retail manager. Here, he is able to share with customers how best to coax plants out of a soil so bereft of rain.

Borseth — whose first spoken word was "outside" — grew up here in the Sonoran Desert, wondering why he had to be stuck inside a classroom to learn.

"It's really just a part of my being, just to get my hands in the soil to watch this natural miracle unfold, of putting a seed in the ground and watching it emerge," Borseth said.

For Borseth, agriculture is part of what it means to be human, but its ancient, traditional practices and products began to slip away in the last century — what he calls "a great forgetting" of what food is.

Seeds, however, offer a great remembrance. Growing and tasting ancient heirloom seeds are the closest we can get to time travel, Borseth said, because we're eating what our ancestors did generations before, thanks to the persistent seeds that have stuck around.

A savior of seeds and a garden guru, Borseth looks to the future, and hopes that the 1,000-year-old seed he nurtures into a tepary bean will still be here in another thousand years.



Phyllis Valenzuela and Angie Moreno

— the San Xavier Co-op Farm

It took a boiling June that stank of onions for **Angie Moreno**, now 19, to learn the hard way where food comes from.

For four weeks last summer, Moreno harvested crops and watched closely over younger plants in San Xavier Co-op Farm's nursery. She, in turn, was under the eye of her grandmother, **Phyllis Valenzuela**, the farm's events coordinator.

Despite what she previously thought, Moreno learned that there's more to farming than planting seeds and watering them. She sweated alongside a handful of teenagers and heard stories about other Tohono O'odham's struggles to keep crops alive.

"It just made me realize how important it is to keep everything alive, traditional food as well as our traditions," Moreno said.

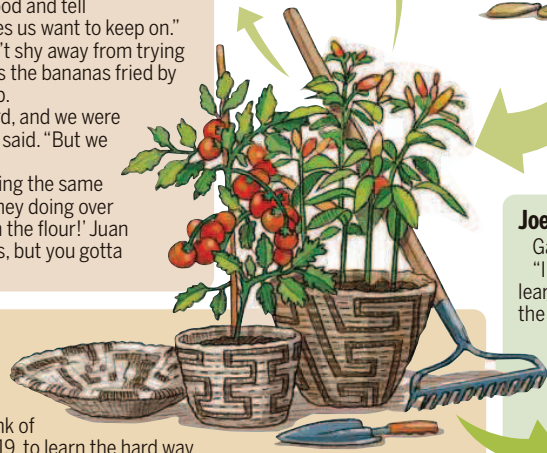
Even the onions, whose scent Moreno came to detest after weeks in the field.

But then Valenzuela took some of the harvest and showed the younger workers how to make onion rings in mesquite flour.

"They actually tasted good," said Moreno as she blushed and smiled at her grandmother.

Before last summer, Moreno hadn't been too close with her. After growing and harvesting crops, and watching Valenzuela turn them into delicious meals, Moreno said she realized how knowledgeable her grandmother is. Now she wants to pass on what Valenzuela has taught her.

"When we get together, she learns," Valenzuela grinned, nudging her granddaughter's shoulder.



Joel Martinez — Las Milpitas

Gardening at Las Milpitas has helped **Joel Martinez** cry.

"I've become more emotional because of it," Martinez said. "I've learned to say I'm sorry more, apologize for saying the wrong thing in the moment."

Two years ago, Martinez moved out of his Dallas apartment and came to Tucson to visit his mother for what he thought would be for a couple months. Then he saw that she was unable to care for the plants in her backyard.

Martinez started to tend to them, an art he realized he'd forgotten in the city. One day, he wandered across the street to Las Milpitas Community Farm, a program of the Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona.

Martinez applied for a plot, and began reconnecting with the earth.

"This is obviously in my DNA," Martinez said. "This is what humans do."

Martinez began taking life with a grain of patience. Surrounded by fellow

gardeners, he learned to listen, and, much like the seeds he dug homes for in the ground, he began to flourish.

"And that's what a community garden is, it's a sanctuary for people to come and communicate, start revolutions," Martinez said. "The garden allows us to have conversations with ourselves about who we are, to reflect on our life, and then we get to possibly come across other individuals and share that with them."

