The Case for More Diversity in Food Media? Look No Further Than Phoenix, Arizona.
By: Cassie Brucci

Of all the Eater articles that I have bookmarked, the one I revisit most is Bill Addison's review of Phoenix's food scene. Yes, Bill Addison is an excellent writer who approaches his subject with an equal mix of reverence and honesty. But this article stood out more than usual, and it was because he was one of the first national writers to say what we locals have known for a while: Phoenix is a great American food city.

Those of us who have spent a significant amount of time in the Valley, as we call it, are acutely aware of the strength of our local food scene. Far from just the town with Oprah's favorite pizza place, the greater Phoenix area has come a long way since Chris Bianco burst onto the national scene in the early 2000s, giving rise to "New Arizonan" cuisine and an up-and-coming crop of young chefs carving out a new path. Not to mention we have nationally-acclaimed chefs like Bianco, Kevin Binkley, and Silvana Salcido Esparza, to name a few.

With such an exciting wave of culinary talent in every corner of this far-spread city, it's puzzling to think about why this city hasn't been widely recognized on a national level as a great food city. There has been a long list of theories as to why this is, and it can be (at least partially) attributed to a lack of local writers at major culinary media outlets.

The late Dori J. Maynard encouraged journalists to take an intentional look at society through a framework developed by her father, Robert C. Maynard, called *faultlines*: "What are the differences that, without relief from their pressures, can fracture our relationships and social structures?" The five distinct categories — race, gender, class, generation, and geography — were chosen because these areas shape both personal identity and social tensions. Maynard believed that "by acknowledging our own faultlines – the frame of reference for all of our own experiences – we can correct for missing pieces in the way we interpret an event or issue."

It's no secret the media industry has a race, gender, and class diversity problem. In food media specifically, this can have detrimental results. Coverage that should focus on our country's rich culinary history is reduced to pandering to a Eurocentric audience. From referring to non-Western cuisines as "cheap eats" while glorifying white chefs who cook the same dishes, to using words like "exotic" to describe non-western cuisines, the lack of diversity continues to position white, male-owned restaurants as those most worthy of our respect and patronage. In the restaurant world, where a review or profile can make or break you, this unfairly tips the scale in favor of restaurants run by white males, leaving people of color, women, or immigrants to become another sobering statistic.

"In the culinary industry we are so often judged for our African, Caribbean, African American, and Latin food by people who have little to no emotional or cultural connection to it," chef Kwame Onwuachi wrote in a 2019 piece for *Food & Wine*. When the majority of writers reviewing restaurants have no ties to non-western cultures, it is too easy to leave out the

nuances necessary to help outsiders fully understand and appreciate the story and meaning behind the meal.

The same argument can be viewed through a geographical lens. It's challenging to be an authentic arbiter of a city's culinary landscape when you have no ties to it. What has been written of Phoenix's food scene by non-locals has been riddled with tired clichés. Stereotypes that Phoenix has no regional identity or culture are so widespread they've permeated discussions on the national front, even when the coverage is mostly favorable.

Local journalists, who work tirelessly to break these stereotypes, are not immune to fielding questions about why Phoenix's food scene still isn't taken seriously by national outlets. Are we too spread out? Do we have a regional identity, something most food writers seem to agree is a factor for a great food city? Is Phoenix still just a place with terrible politics? Questions like these may be valid to those who don't live here but can be easily debunked by those who do.

Phoenix *is* spread out, hindering the amount of ground one can cover when only here for a couple of days. But for locals, this makes for an exciting quest, with new restaurants to constantly discover in neighboring cities. Outside of Phoenix proper, you'll find a vast array of incredible restaurants, often owned and operated by immigrant families. Mesa is home to a thriving Asian Restaurant District with 54 different countries represented. South of Mesa, Chandler is home to a growing Iraqi community with some of the best shawarma you can find outside of Iraq. Across town in a Glendale strip mall, you can eat your way through restaurants serving up multiple types of Mexican cuisine from various regions of the country. And with Phoenix's massive population growth fueled in large part by immigration, there are likely to be even more thriving pockets of culinary communities in the coming months and years — and they're almost guaranteed to be worth the drive.

In a place with such rapid population growth, it can be easy to assume that Phoenix doesn't have a regional culinary identity. But saying such a thing is ignorant at best, and whitewashing at worst. Arizona is home to the largest Native American population in the United States, and a new wave of chefs are working with Native chefs to create bespoke dishes using ingredients commonly used by the Pima, Tohono O'odham, Navajo, and the Hohokam tribes. These dishes, which use foraged ingredients that change daily, are forming a new cultural identity and cuisine being referred to as "New Arizonan." Other chefs in the state, like Jason and Kathryn Dwight, are taking advantage of Arizona's local farms and ranches to create a new vision of what it can mean to be farm to table: everything is made in-house, including the condiments, and no parts of any animal go unused. Even local artisans are putting an emphasis on using ingredients found within the state to make food and drinks that can only be described as uniquely Sonoran. Phoenix may not have its own version of the Philly Cheesesteak or the Chicago Dog, but it has something better: a food scene that honors the land, its inhabitants, and local agriculture.

What is perhaps the most-questioned theory focuses on Phoenix's perception problem: Are preconceived notions about this city keeping us out of the spotlight? At its most benign, Phoenix is viewed as a place with too little culture and too many chain restaurants. At its most damning,

Phoenix is still thought of as a place where people favor far-right politicians and policies (this is still partly true, but we've come a long way in the past decade). It draws many comparisons to a place I lived for almost three years: Dallas, TX. Also widely dismissed by tastemakers as a city with no culture and a penchant for chain restaurants, the national coverage of the Dallas food scene has done a complete 180 in recent years, even winning the distinct honor of being named *Bon Appétit's* Restaurant City of the Year in 2019. While no one can say what made national publications change their tune, former *Dallas Observer* critic Brian Reinhart pointed out that local newsrooms did not fully portray the depth and breadth of the city's dining scene: "Dallas can't have a national reputation as a diverse, thrilling place to eat unless its own full-time food writers start arguing that it is, indeed, a diverse, thrilling place to eat."

Unlike Dallas, I would argue Phoenix's small but mighty team of food writers has done an incredible job of covering the culinary scene here, including Chris Malloy's aforementioned, award-winning series about the Sonoran Arcana and our "New Arizonan" cuisine. What do we do, then, if our local coverage is extolling the virtues of our food scene, but the national publications are still excluding us? Journalism can (and should) be the act of shaping a community, but you can't do that when you're not part of the community you're writing about. In the same article I lauded earlier, the author outright admits that Phoenix wasn't on his radar. How is a city expected to get on someone's radar if they can only be bothered to stop by for a couple of days every few years?

Everyone likes food to some degree — it's integral to our survival. But food writers are most likely drawn to this vertical because we have experienced firsthand the communal power that food holds. More than purely sustenance, it is a way to expand our understanding of different cultures and increase trust and connection among people. Food writing wields a similar power, educating and inspiring readers to consider a new dish or destination they wouldn't have prior. Major food publications like *Food & Wine, Bon Appétit*, and *Eater* have the ability to help break stereotypes and introduce their audience to new ways of thinking about different parts of the country. And it starts with hiring staff who know the area inside and out, and not people who, for example, still think Arizona's only good chef is Chris Bianco.