

The 5 best bites and sips we tried in February around metro Phoenix

By Tirion Boan and Sara Crocker

With event season in full swing, it's a great time to visit the Valley. And with plenty of tourists in town, metro Phoenix restaurants and bars are eager to show off their skills. At the Desert Botanical Garden, chefs and vendors set up their tents for the Devour Culinary Classic. The two-day event showcased some of the best the Valley has to offer. In the cocktail world, one of Phoenix's top bars rolled out a new menu filled with enticing tipples. For the Phoenix New Times food team, it was a very tasty month. Here are five of the best things we ate and drank around the Valley in February.

Banana cream pancakes at Butters Pancakes & Cafe

Multiple locations One local restaurant mini-chain built its success on its pancakes. And it's easy to see why. The original restaurant is Butterfield's Pancake House on Shea Boulevard in Scottsdale. From there, the owners expanded the concept to include new food items and a full coffee menu. The expanded concept is called Butters Pancakes & Cafe, which now has three locations around the Valley. Whichever location you pick, make sure to order some pancakes. The flapjacks themselves are fluffy and have the distinct taste of salted butter baked right into the batter. Dial them up a notch with the banana cream topping, a dish piled high with banana pudding, fresh bananas, caramel and crumbled graham crackers sprinkled with powdered sugar. The warm, salty pancakes pair perfectly with the sweet topping and cold banana slices for a bite filled with flavor, texture and satisfying contrast.

Kiss of Fire at Haru Sushi

20165 N. 67th Ave. #125, Glendale

Tucked in a strip mall in Glendale lies a cozy yet modern neighborhood restaurant churning out some excellent sushi. And it's hard to go wrong with Haru's selection of fresh fish and rolls. Sushi fans will see recognizable options on the menu, such as the rainbow roll or shrimp tempura. But what makes these rolls stand out in a crowd is the rice. Rice isn't, and shouldn't be, the centerpiece with sushi rolls, but it can do more than blend into the background. At Haru, it's soft and has just the right amount of sweetness. It shines particularly well in the Kiss of Fire roll, which is filled with spicy tuna and cucumber and topped with albacore tuna, a slice of serrano pepper and a dot of Sriracha on each piece. The spiciness of the fish and chile plays off the gently sweet rice for an outstanding bite that leaves you sipping water but coming back for more.

54th Street Club at Platform 18

3626 E. Indian School Road

When Platform 18 at Century Grand debuted its latest menu, the most eye-catching addition wasn't coming out of a cocktail shaker. As you begin your journey through New York City on the replica Presidential Pullman train car, you can sample sweet and salty snacks offered as complementary garnishes. One of our favorite, and most generous examples comes with the 54th Street Club. This shaken cocktail is a play on a spicy margarita, using popcorn-infused reposado tequila, Cointreau, lime juice, pandan and the peppery Japanese spice blend togarashi.

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Leaning into the train's latest leg of the journey, the drink is served in a paper to-go cup that is synonymous with New York. Served next to it is a small burlap bag of togarashi-dusted popcorn, adding an extra kick and something to share with your drinking buddies, if you're willing.

Blueberry bagel at Bagelero

Location varies We caught up with the roaming bagel and juice cart outside of Mis Raices Cafe. The roving company the latest of several local bakers offering their take on a desert-born bagel and one of the most exciting we've tasted. The exterior is not shatteringly crisp, but the interior has great flavor and chew. Blueberry can be a controversial bagel flavor, but Bagelero is up to the task of coaxing out its subtle sweet-tart flavor and catching the eye with twists of blue from the fruit inside.

Tacos de Canasta de Calabazo & Cascabel

Devour Culinary Classic It was clear to diners and judges at the 15th annual Devour Culinary Classic that the Gastronomic Union of Tucson understood the assignment. The collective of chefs from the City of Gastronomy took home the Best in Show award for its three dishes, including this vegan taco. Mesquite-roasted white squash, cascabel chiles, pepitas and tepary beans were tucked into a supple corn tortilla and topped with pomegranate pickled shallots, vegan crema, mushroom chicharron with Sonoran chile crisp and micro cilantro. It was rich and comforting without feeling heavy, making for a bright and playful bite that stood out from the crowd.

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