



Lauren Cusimano

▼ R.I.P.

CULINARY LEGACY

CECELIA MILLER, ACTIVIST AND FOUNDER OF FRY BREAD HOUSE, HAS DIED

Cecelia Miller, who founded Fry Bread House in 1992 and ran it until the mid-2010s, died last week after a long, non-COVID-related illness. She was 81. For decades, her eatery has been a pillar of indigenous food in Phoenix and a jewel in Arizona's restaurant scene

Most famously, Fry Bread House won a James Beard Award, the highest honor in American food, in 2012. Sandra Miller, Cecelia's daughter and the current operator of Fry Bread House, remembers the day the foundation called her mom with the news.

"She didn't even know who James Beard was," Sandra says. "She was like 'What are you talking about? I'm pretty busy. Can you call me back?'"

In 1992, Cecelia Miller opened Fry Bread House on Eighth Street and Indian School Road. She had three menu items and four tables. She made \$50 her first day.

Cecelia, a Tohono O'odham, was born in 1938 in Sells, Arizona, capital of the Tohono O'odham Nation. When she was young, she moved to the Gila River Indian Community when her mother married an Akimel O'odham farmer who lived there. She grew up on the latter reservation, just south of Phoenix. "She was the main cook and caretaker for her four brothers and sisters," Sandra says of her mother. "That's where she learned how to cook."

At 16, Cecelia left for high school in Phoenix. The professional kitchen was still a long way off.

From her first marriage, to a Laguna Pueblo, Cecelia had five boys — a family started while working and going to school. Years later, she got remarried to Joedd Miller, a Presbyterian minister from Iowa who moved to Sacaton after working with the Maasai tribe in Africa and poor youth in India. (Sandra and her sister are from Cecelia's second marriage.)



Miller was 81.

Sandra Miller

Miller envisioned Fry Bread House as a place where Native people could comfortably eat.

The two were highly active in progressive causes, including furthering the sanctuary movement, turning part of Joedd's central Phoenix church into a homeless shelter, and raising money for the Democratic Party. At one point, Cecelia even started a daycare for the children of indigenous people working in the city.

Cecelia opened Fry Bread House after saving money from a day job in real estate.

Much of the impetus for opening, Sandra says, was to create a place where Native people could comfortably eat. "When she came to Phoenix from the reservation, there was nowhere she could eat that she didn't feel prejudiced," Sandra says. "She really felt bad that there so many people who came to the city for jobs, but they had nowhere to eat."

Fry Bread House, Sandra says of her mother's aim, was to be "a space where Native people could go into their aunt's home, or their grandma's home, or their family's home on the reservation and just sit down and eat, and be nourished for your journey."

Back in 1992, there weren't many commercial eateries in Phoenix cooking indigenous food. Fry Bread House and its three menu items — plain fry bread, fry bread tacos, and fry bread with honey and sugar — quickly became popular. "She really couldn't believe that there was a market for that then," Sandra says. "There was no fry bread anything in Phoenix except at the fair at that time — once a year in October."

Cecelia used her own mother's fry bread recipe, minutely but relentlessly tweaked. The bread was and is fried in vegetable shortening. It is puffy yet crunchy yet chewy.

Over the years, Fry Bread House moved three times, the first enabled by a grant from the Tohono O'odham Nation. Cecelia's ability to manage the restaurant diminished with the onset of rheumatoid arthritis starting some >>p18

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Chow Bella from p 17

15 years ago. Sandra, who helped her mom open the restaurant in 1992 (for which mother paid for daughter's college — Cecelia put four of her kids through college by selling fry bread), became general manager in 2014. The torch was soon passed.

But not before Cecelia amassed a huge following in Arizona and beyond. And not before she earned the highest honor in her trade.

Sandra Miller recalls the James Beard Award ceremony in New York City in 2012. Her mom wore traditional dress and enjoyed a Champagne in the green room. At the end of her acceptance speech before the whole crowd, she remarked, as Sandra remembers, "Who would have thought that a little girl, drawing in the dirt on the reservation, would end up in the Lincoln Center on your stage getting this award?"

Even until recently, Sandra called Cecelia about Fry Bread House operations many times a day — to give updates, to seek wisdom.

"She had a firm hand," Sandra says, "but she was very sweet and kind." **CHRIS MALLOY**

▼ BREAKFAST BEAT

In 2020, Morning Kick Has Gone From Food Truck to Storefront — and Now Back Again

If you shop at the Gilbert Farmers' Market on Saturdays, you're most likely familiar with Morning Kick and its famous breakfast burritos. Husband-and-wife team Scott and Mindy Waldron have been running their food truck business there for the past three years.

Her background is in teaching, marketing, and graphic design; his is in sales and catering. So, why a food truck? Inspiration came from their 2-year-old son, a famously picky eater. Scott's mom once made a casserole dish that became the only food the little one would eat.

"We made this dish so many times we joked about selling it," Mindy says. Eventually, Scott's grandfather found a food truck in Tucson, brought it to Phoenix, and fixed it up. Morning Kick was born.

There weren't too many breakfast trucks out in the far east Valley, so Morning Kick served all-day breakfast burritos. "We wrote a burrito menu and it just took off," Mindy says.

The casserole burritos are no more, but other choices have emerged. The most popular is the Cowboy Burrito, a 14-inch

Morning Kick is cooking out of the truck again — right next to its brick-and-mortar restaurant.

tortilla packed to the brim with crispy applewood-smoked bacon, scrambled eggs, and jack cheese. All the burritos now come with crunchy tater tots. The coffee is from Peixoto, a crop-to-cup coffee roaster located in Chandler.

Their brick-and-mortar spot debuted in January.

"It had to be in Gilbert, because that's our town," Mindy says. They found the ideal spot on Chandler Heights Road, expanded the menu, hired extra people, and went to work.

Then came the coronavirus.

To stay afloat, the owners scaled back hours, let go of some of their employees, continued catering, and started cooking out of the truck again — right next to the new restaurant. "The hardest part," Mindy says, pausing before issuing a long exhale, "is having to cut it down so much. This is not just about us. We have people whose livelihoods depend on us."

She's applied for the Paycheck Protection Program but hasn't heard anything back. "I'm worried if we might have missed the deadline," she says.

Once, the two divided their forces between the truck and the restaurant. Now Mindy stays home with the kids because of lack of childcare and Scott manages the truck. "We always have an owner on-site," Mindy says.

The Waldrons' commitment to the community remains strong. They instituted a burrito-for-burrito program in April, which they matched people's donations up to \$100 and delivered burritos to front-line workers. Chandler Regional Hospital received 40 Morning Kick burritos.

Along with other restaurants in the state, they're now allowed to resume on-site dining. But according to Mindy and Scott, reopening is much more difficult than people imagine. To follow social distancing regulations, yet keep the current prices, they have to downsize. More distancing means fewer tables.

For now, customers may place to-go orders online, by email, or phone. Additional cashflow comes from tips, gift cards, and hiring the business for catering.

"We want people to know that we are still here for the community, trying to keep the momentum going," Mindy says. "And we would love your help." **BAHAR ANOOSH**