



EATING THE COMPETITION
 FRYBREAD GOES UPSCALE AS A DOWN-HOME COOK IN ARIZONA WINS A BIG AWARD



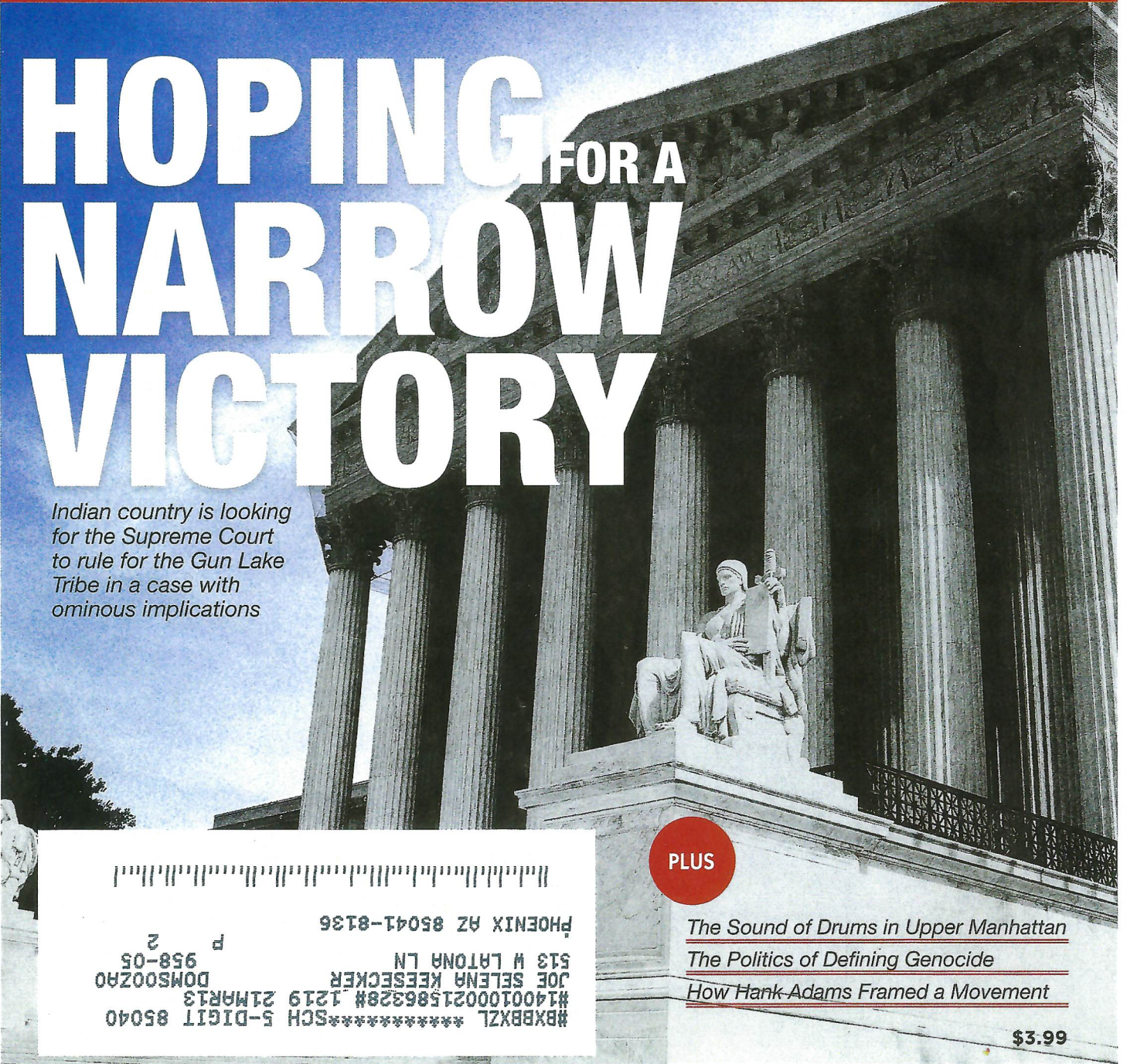
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Five-Star Frybread

A beloved Native restaurant is cooking in the big leagues after winning a prestigious culinary award

BY LEE ALLEN



Cecelia Miller (left) with her daughter, Sandra, has been serving frybread for 20 years.

The Fry Bread House in Phoenix was one of five recipients of the 2012 James Beard Foundation America's Classics Award, the highest honor for food and beverage professionals in North America. Not too bad for restaurant owner Cecelia Miller of the Tohono O'odham Nation, who for 20 years has been using the same frybread recipe and techniques she learned as a child in her restaurant.

That family recipe is served to long lines of hungry diners daily and has been the top menu item since Miller began hand-stretching and deep-frying dough at her Fry Bread House, opened out of necessity: to help pay for the education of the family's five boys and two

girls. Her brothers showed up to make it a family project, patching up drywall and applying a coat of paint. "There were just three items on that original menu, and she made \$50 on opening day," says daughter Sandra Miller.

Cecelia Miller, her son (and restaurant manager) Michael Perry, and an all-Native staff now prepare and present their offerings from an inconspicuous building marked simply by a sign indicating: NATIVE AMERICAN FOOD. A smaller sign inside notes: TOHONO O'ODHAM OWNED AND OPERATED.

The prestigious Beard honor is high praise indeed. "Our foundation's mission is to celebrate, nurture and preserve America's diverse culinary heritage," Susan Ungaro, president of the James Beard Foundation, said in an e-mail to ICT-MN. "We encourage more chefs who are keeping Native cuisine at the forefront of their menu to reach out to us."

A 17-member Restaurant and Chef Award Committee made up of industry professionals and food journalists chooses America's Classics winners and the Fry Bread House was lauded for its "blissfully delicious specialty," "timeless appeal," and "quality food that reflects the character of the community."

The modest and soft-spoken Miller says, "I'd never heard of the James Beard award. There are all kinds of scams going on and I was busy, so I just put aside the notification until I saw the story on the front page of the *Arizona Republic* newspaper. The reporter told me: 'This is a big deal. It's like the Oscar of the culinary arts.'" (It's also the first time a James Beard award has been given to a Native facility.)

Publicity surrounding the award has resulted in lots of new faces com-

"The reporter told me: 'This is a big deal. It's like the Oscar of the culinary arts.'"

ing through the front door. "It's always busy any day at lunchtime, but since the award was announced, it has just been crazy," says son, Nathan Perry.

Whether covered with meats, beans and chilies or topped with honey and powdered sugar, Miller's delicious bit of doughy debauchery has been drawing droves to its location near Indian School Road since the doors opened in 1992. A reviewer in the *Republic* noted: "This isn't where you'd come in search of green, leafy nutrition. It is, however, where you'd come to make happy grunting noises while you eat."

Calorie-counters are advised to check their conscience (and calculators) at the door. Frybread tacos built on a base of *chumuth*—deep-fried tortilla—can be assembled in a variety of ways that all start with refried beans, cheese and lettuce. Options beyond that include mild green or spicy red chili beef, seasoned ground beef and a spicy chorizo. Toppings include spicy chili strips and a dollop of cooling sour cream.

And while the taco form of frybread is the most requested menu item, many regulars ask for something called the Joedd Special, which is described as a piece of plain frybread with a bowl of stew that "will warm your tummy and nourish your soul." Choose from red or green chili stew or hominy, vegetable beef, or menudo (tripe soup). This all comes with the chef's promise that "all are cooked slowly and perfectly."

The house desserts are all open-faced frybreads that can be smeared with butter/cinnamon/sugar; butter/powdered sugar; butter/chocolate; butter, jam or honey.

Ironically, the popular eatery is next to a psychic who predicts customers will like the red chili beef taco. There's Indian jewelry outside, Indian tacos inside, limited seating inside, limited parking outside. Diners range from former Arizona governors and state politicians to



The staff is all-Native; the food is all good.

the folks next door. "All ages, all ethnicities, all socioeconomic levels—anyone and everyone from all walks of life," Miller says proudly. Alison Cook, who nominated the Fry Bread House for the James Beard award, noted in her recommendation: "The faithful clientele is wonderfully democratic, from Tohono O'odham friends of the house to hipsters and businessmen and the ever-present lucky traveler."

And while Miller is known for her cooking, she should also be lauded for her treatment of employees, many

of whom have been with her for years. Priscilla Nahee, Pima/Hopi; Deborah Massey, Cocopah/Colorado River Indian Tribes; Theresa Charley, Navajo; Lori Susunkewa, Hopi; and Steven Velasco, Tohono O'odham are just a few members of the all-Native crew.

Miller likes to tell the story of Virginia Hughes, an Akimel O'odham, who recently retired after 15 years. "She was about 50 and had never worked before... just walked in one day looking for her first job off the reservation. She knew how to cook, but unless you're a five-star chef, this business never pays a lot of money. It's a training ground to learn how to work and take direction. I tell employees they can start here and I'll give them the basic skills for success—like a work ethic—but I want them to go on and better themselves," she says.

"Mom recognized early that if you better your employees, you'll have better employees," says Sandra. "She encouraged her staff over the years to go to school and get their GEDs and established a policy at the restaurant: If you don't have your GED, you can't work here."

Miller was scheduled to participate in local honors at the annual Friends of James Beard Benefit Dinner during the Scottsdale Culinary Festival on April 18 with a menu that features a signature dish of a previous award-winning chef.

The official 2012 awards were to be presented on May 7 at a gala at Lincoln Center in New York City. Miller is pleased but nonplussed about attending the ceremony in Manhattan. "I was in New York once before and the impression I got was that it was a big, busy place with lots of people always rushing here and there. Maybe this time I can slow down and see some of the tourist attractions." ❀

Read more about Miller and all of this year's winners at JamesBeard.org.