

Fry Bread House wins Beard culinary award

By Howard Settel
 Republic restaurant critic

Cecelia Miller of the Tohono O'odham Nation opened her first Fry Bread House in 1992, using the same fry-bread recipes and techniques she learned as a child.

She tops the hand-stretched, deep-fried dough with such savory toppings as red chile stew and chorizo and cheese, and her dessert fry bread with a killer combination of butter and chocolate.

Her food has always won praise from her customers. Now her restaurant has

been ranked by culinary experts as among the best in the country.

Fry Bread House on Tuesday was one of five restaurants nationwide to receive an "America's Classics" designation from the prestigious James Beard Foundation, which hands out the restaurant industry's version of the Academy Awards each year. It is the first Native American restaurant to receive the designation since the awards were started in 1998.

Miller's son, Fry Bread House manager

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Fry Bread House manager Michael Perry and his mother, owner Cecelia Miller, show off their savory fare. PAT SHANNAHAN/THE REPUBLIC

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Fry bread

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Michael Perry, said he was "floored" by the honor.

"It's a testament to my mother and her hard work," he said. "We wanted something for the community."

The James Beard Foundation gives the "America's Classics" designation to restaurants recognized for their "timeless appeal," which are "beloved for quality food that reflects the character of the community." Winners must have been in the business for at least 10 years and preferably be informal and moderately priced.

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The Fry Bread House in central Phoenix is a tiny, loud, nondescript spot on North Seventh Avenue near Indian School Road. Come during the lunch-hour rush and you'll find yourself at the end of a line snaking back from the "Order Here" counter out the front door. The family operates a second location in Mesa, near Dobson and Baseline roads, with the same menu and recipes.

"America's Classics" winners are chosen by the James Beard Foundation's 17-member Restaurant and Chef Award Committee, which consists of food journalists and industry professionals.

The committee cited Fry Bread House's "blissfully

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MICHAEL PERRY

Fry Bread House manager and son of owner Cecelia Miller

delicious specialty," which it calls "downy bronze cushions the size of dinner plates."

It also cited the "all-native staff" and the "democratic" clientele: "friends of the house to hipsters to businessmen and the ever-present lucky traveler."

Indian fry bread is a Native American staple made from white flour, baking powder, salt and Crisco, created out of necessity by Native Americans

after they were relegated to reservations and provided with commodities from the federal government.

The bread fed large families like the Millers. In fact, the original Fry Bread House was opened to help pay for the education of the Miller family's seven children.

"As you might guess, the Fry Bread House is not where you'd come in search of green, leafy nutrition," *The Republic* wrote

in a 2001 review when the restaurant moved to its current location. "It is, however, where you'd come to make happy grunting noises while you eat."

Fry Bread House is the second Valley restaurant to receive the "Classics" honor. El Chorro in Paradise Valley got the nod in 2005.

Other 2012 winners include Nora's Fish Creek Inn, Willson, Wyo.; St. Elmo Steak House, Indianapolis; Jones Bar-B-Q Diner, Marianna, Ark.; and Shady Glen, Manchester, Conn.

The awards dinner will take place in New York City at Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center on May 7.

Read more about the awards at blog.jamesbeard.org.