

A loaf of bread, a sense of community

James Beard Award winner Don Guerra joins School of Transborder Studies as a baker-in-residence

By Scott Bordow, ASU News
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It's just past 8:30 on a Wednesday morning and already more than 50 people are in line waiting for [Barrio Bread bakery](#) in Tucson, Arizona, to open.

The doors to the bakery, located just east of downtown Tucson, open at 9 a.m., and for the next three hours, a continuous stream of customers comes through, buying loaves of bread and chatting with owner Don Guerra, who won a James Beard Award in 2022 for outstanding baker.

Guerra seems to know most of his customers, many of whom have been coming to his bakery weekly, if not daily, since it opened in 2015.

Tom Trebisky has lived in Tucson since 1970. He could get bread anywhere in town. But Barrio is the only place he goes, and there's a simple reason he gives for that: "Life is too short to eat bad bread."

Finally, a little after noon, Guerra can sit down for a few minutes. He settles onto a stool and talks about his life, his family, why the simple act of baking once made him drop to his knees and cry in gratitude, and his new role as the baker-in-residence for Arizona State University's School of Transborder Studies.

As part of that role, Guerra will give a lecture, titled "Bread without Borders," on March 5 at the Tempe campus.

"I'll talk about my life's journey," Guerra said.

A journey that started not in Tucson, but in the kitchen of a small home in downtown Tempe.

Connecting food and community

Long before he knew what his life's calling would be, Guerra grew up in a household of bakers. His mom baked cookies and loaves of bread, and the smell of his grandmother's flour tortillas wafted through her adobe home, which was a stone's

Event details

[Bread Without Borders](#)

Noon–1:30 p.m., Thursday,
March 5.

Alumni Lounge, Memorial
Union, ASU Tempe campus.
Free.

throw away from ASU's Tempe campus.

Whatever the Guerras had, they shared.

"My family always had big, big gatherings, and food has been our vehicle to connect people and just to show appreciation for life," Guerra said.

Guerra initially chose a different path, though. He enrolled at the University of Arizona to study anthropology but soon realized academia wasn't for him.

"I was the first in my family to go to school, a young Latino person that didn't have the experience of how to navigate a university," he said. "I didn't really have anyone to show me how to organize my classes. Not being from that culture, it took a lot of effort to try to figure out how to really be productive and successful in that environment.

"What I realized is that I really wanted to build something with my hands."

What that something was, Guerra wasn't sure. He moved to Flagstaff, searching for his future, and one day was riding his bicycle on Mount Elden when he realized he was turned around. He asked a man for help, they started talking and the man told Guerra he worked at a bakery in Flagstaff.

"He asked me if I needed a job," Guerra recalled. "Of course, I was broke."

The man invited him to the bakery that night. Guerra never left.

"Seeing that environment reminded me of my father, Bennie," said Guerra, whose father owns Bennie's Back Alley Barber Shop in south Scottsdale. "My dad is probably the most influential entrepreneur I've ever had in my life.

"I felt like being in a bakery, I could serve my community like my father, make a product and provide a service that people enjoy. It was so very comfortable to me."

(Video: <https://youtu.be/BUTgOmNeURs>)

Guerra opened his first bakery in 1996 in Flagstaff, and then a second in Ashland, Oregon, a few years later. But by 2000, he was overwhelmed and exhausted. He sold the business, moved to Tucson and re-enrolled at the University of Arizona, earning a teaching degree.

He taught math at an elementary school for seven years, but in 2009 the bread bug got him again. His garage became a production kitchen, and he sold bread out of his home, his car and at local food markets.

Then, in 2011, Guerra connected with Native Seeds/Search, a seed bank in Tucson, as well as Hayden Flour Mills in Gilbert and BKW Farms in Marana, to build a local grain chain, focusing on bringing back heritage grains of the Southwest.

One night at home, Guerra took the grains, milled them and poured in a little milk that made the dough rise immediately.

"The flour smelled different," he said. "The next day, I pulled that loaf of bread out of the oven, and I just fell to my knees. It was the moment I said passion meets purpose. I was dedicated to serve

my community in a bigger way, to feed them the grains of the Southwest that are part of my heritage.”

It's clear, from watching Guerra work, that the bakery is more than a business to him. He knows most of the customers by name. When he hears an older couple is moving back to Oklahoma, he expresses his regret that he won't see them anymore.

He sees himself filling a circle, serving the farmers and millers by buying the grain they produce and then satisfying his customers who buy the finished product.

“This is who I am, making something with my hands that can make people happy,” he said.

And it is a gift Guerra shares. He said he has taught more than 10,000 people in the Tucson area how to make bread.

“Every day, I wake up and just think about how grateful I am that people want to be a part of this bread community,” Guerra said. “It's a dream come true to have something that's incredibly sustainable here in Tucson, and I'm really indebted to the support that has been given me.”

Coming back to education

Last fall, a staffer from ASU's School of Transborder Studies attended Guerra's pizza-making class at the Barrio Bread location in Gilbert. The staffer asked Guerra if he would be willing to talk to some students from the school.

Guerra said he would, and soon after, he spoke to a transborder studies class.

“I gave a presentation about my life, my entrepreneurial journey, the challenges I've had and the successes I've had,” Guerra said. “I feel it pretty much applies to young people trying to navigate a life that they think should be linear.

“My coaching is that life is not a straight path. There's many, many directions we can take on our final path to our destination and where we find passion and purpose that makes us happy.”

Irasema Coronado, director of the School of Transborder Studies, met with Guerra and was so impressed by his energy and message that she invited him not only to give a lecture on campus but to meet with several classes this spring and be named the school's baker-in-residence, which is built on the school's past artist-in-residence program.

“It's common in universities to have an entrepreneur-in-residence, a diplomat-in-residence, an artist-in-residence or a musician-in-residence,” Coronado said. “We thought, ‘Well, let's have a baker-in-residence.’

“He's a wonderful guy, a great speaker, very inspiring and very motivational. And he brings an educational background, the entrepreneurial spirit and then the giving back to your community. His leadership is just amazing in that area. And he's a James Beard Award winner. It was a ‘wow.’”

Guerra said he will weave through his journey and his life as he talks to students, with one central message: “Being young and not knowing everything is OK. You will be OK as long as you show up

every day.”

More than 30 years after first setting foot in that Flagstaff bakery, Guerra still shows up every day, serving a community through the loaves he and his staff lovingly make.

“This,” Guerra said, “is who I am.”

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Owner Don Guerra (center) and sales assistant Miriam Vause (left) fill customers' orders at Barrio Bread's bakery in Tucson, Arizona, on Feb. 25. They sold much of their freshly baked inventory between when they opened, at 9 a.m., and noon to a nonstop line of customers. Guerra is serving as a baker-in-residence in ASU's School of Transborder Studies. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)



Don Guerra (left), owner of Barrio Bread, and sales assistant Miriam Vause help a long line of customers at the bakery in Tucson, Arizona, on Feb. 25. Many of the customers have been coming to the bakery weekly, if not daily, since it opened in 2015. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News



“Every day, I wake up and just think about how grateful I am that people want to be a part of this bread community,” said Barrio Bread owner Don Guerra, shown here in his Tucson, Arizona, bakery. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News



Barrio Bread's heritage loaf is baked daily and features grains from the Southwest. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News