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Field to Feast

Peppers, onions, and tomatoes, oh my!

by Molly Blake

Squash, eggplant, onion, tomato, peppers. Sounds like the lineup for a savory batch of ratatouille, a chunky veggie dish that originated in 18th-century France. But you only have to go to the valley tucked neatly along the southern tip of the Colorado River to find Yuma and all these wonderfully fresh ingredients ripe for the picking — literally.

Yuma is home to about 90 percent of all the leafy vegetables grown in the U.S. from November through March. Its vast farms teem with 175 different crops including broccoli, wheat, lettuce, and melons. Fed by the Colorado River, Yuma's farms in the winter months have long been burgeoning with crops and produce but now, a new commitment to locally grown farm-fresh food and education is launching Yuma onto the agritourism map.

Just as the cold winter sets in around most parts of the country, Yuma's lush



Photo: Yuma Visitors Bureau

growing season kicks off with balmy temps and a delicious culinary adventure called Field to Feast. These tours are \$30, run January through March, and can be reserved by calling the Yuma Visitors Bureau.

The experience begins at Yuma's iconic Quartermaster Depot, once a busy Army supply hub, and then it's onto the fields where guests can roll up their sleeves and pick crisp veggies, delicate herbs, and fruit from lemon, tangelo, and orange trees.

After that, groups head to Arizona Western College where local chefs and culinary arts students will use the newly picked produce to create a fresh, flavorful meal. Not surprisingly, ratatouille is one of the signature dishes available. Guests take home a recipe card from the meal and a slice of life from the farm.

Stop by downtown Yuma to indulge the group's sweet tooth with an acclaimed Medjool date shake and a bite of date bread at Bard Date Company's Basket Creations and More shop. Spend time with the owner and then head north of downtown where guests meander under the canopy of date palms — home to pickers who still scale the giant trees to inspect, bag, and hand-collect the

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fruit. The company offers tours October through March on the third Saturday of the month.

The crown veggie event is Yuma Lettuce Days. Held in March, the 13th annual celebration of all things lettuce will feature celebrity chefs, alfresco cooking demos, local wine, and The Lettuce Days Leafy Challenge. Visit www.yumalettuce-days.com for more.

A break from the norm, Yuma's agritourism expeditions are a welcome respite from expensive, big-ticket vacations and salute the farmers who've long been devoted to Yuma and its vast natural resources.

Yuma is the place to visit for groups looking to indulge their inner agrarian yearnings.

► Yuma Visitors Bureau
1-800-293-0071
www.visityuma.com

Date-nut tea bread

- 8 ounces pitted dates, chopped
- 1 1/4 cups boiling water
- 6 tablespoons butter or margarine
- 1 egg, lightly beaten
- 1 1/2 cups packed brown sugar
- 2 1/4 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 1/2 teaspoons baking soda
- 1 1/2 teaspoons salt
- 3/4 cup chopped walnuts

Preheat oven to 350°F. Place dates in medium bowl; cover with boiling water. Add butter; stir until melted. Cool to room temperature. Stir in egg and sugar. In large bowl, combine flour, baking soda, and salt. Add date mixture; stir until just blended. Stir in walnuts. Pour batter into greased 9x5-inch loaf pan. Bake 1 hour and 10 minutes or until golden brown. Cool five minutes in pan. Turn out onto wire rack; cool completely. Yield: 1 loaf.



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