

Conservation Burger

At downtown Tucson's Diablo Burger and Good Oak Bar, Derrick Widmark is building infrastructure for local food—one burger at a time.

INTERVIEW AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY MEGAN KIMBLE

You opened the first Diablo Burger in Flagstaff in 2009. How'd it begin?

I was running Diablo Trust, a ranching-based nonprofit conservation group. It was housed at NAU [Northern Arizona University]. Gary Nabhan was at NAU at the time and brought these guys down from Idaho from a group called Lava Lake Lamb. They had a nonprofit like ours and, like ours, they were having trouble making ends meet. They were raising lamb and they started selling their lamb products at local, high-end restaurants; they found that as the sales of the lamb went up, the appreciation for their conservation work went up. That was the lightbulb moment for Diablo Burger.

When people realize that what they're feeding themselves and their families comes from the local community instead of just a shelf in the supermarket ... there is an awareness that having that land remain open and undeveloped and home to food production and wildlife and carbon sequestration and water storage is valuable to the community. That work of communicating the value of land stewardship, that's the work of Diablo Trust. And food tells that story maybe in the most powerful way.

What were some early challenges in opening Diablo Burger?

From Day 1, we said 100 percent of the beef that we would serve would be local, sustainably grown, a product of this landscape-scale stewardship. Why isn't there a Diablo Burger in every town in the West? The answer is infrastructure. As soon as we started doing this, we realized that the infrastructure for a local-foods-based burger joint—processing, storage, transportation—didn't exist. It would have been a dealbreaker for me,

except I had a relationship with these ranches already, and they saw the value in taking the leap into an infrastructure-less place.

In that absence of that infrastructure, we had to create it. We invested our first \$20,000 of income in an off-site freezer area. The ranches looked for a processing facility that would do 50 animals at once on a custom basis. The tragedy of it in Arizona, where beef is the largest cash commodity, is that there is not a single facility in this state that will do that. Since 2009, we have done all of our processing in Colorado, at a family-owned facility.

It's a model that requires trust between the producer, the ranches of the Diablo Trust, and the restaurant.

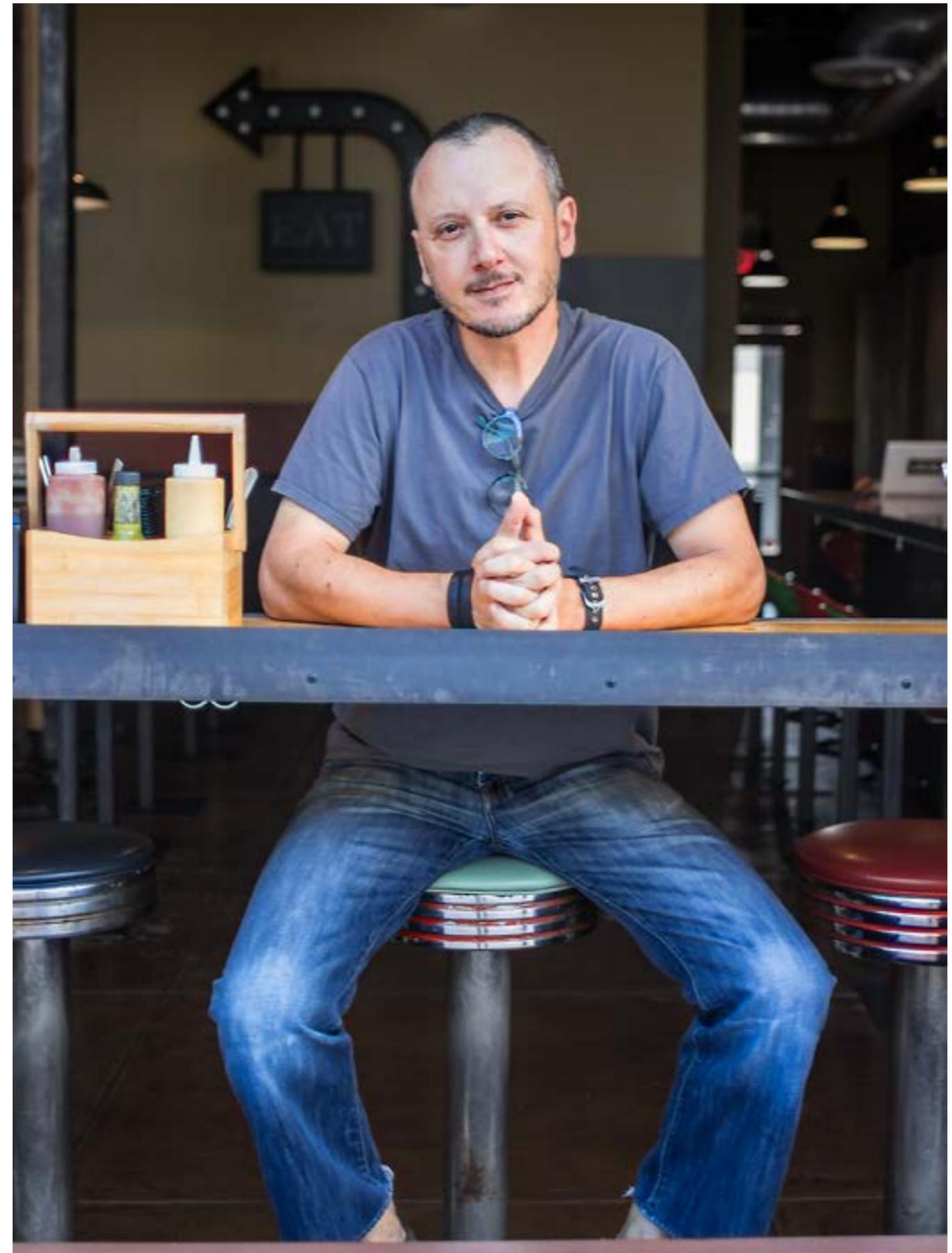
Beyond beef, how else are you supporting local producers?

We said, Day 1 all beef will be 100 percent sourced locally. And we're going to incrementalize on everything else. I've been pleasantly surprised at how quickly we've scaled up. With the exception of a few products, everything is local. As more people see that it's viable, more people want to be a part of it. Restaurants want to work together.

It's a challenge for any business that wants to source locally. There's an absence of economy of scale, absence of vertical integration. It's really only over time and through relationships that require personal investment.

For example, Aaron Cardona [at Arevalos Farm] and I have been talking about this for the past six months. At Diablo Burger, we use a ton of green chilies; we would love to have a single local

Derrick Widmark opened his second Diablo Burger location on Congress Street in downtown Tucson in 2013.





Diablo Burger's Señor Smoke burger comes with ancho grilled onions, grilled avocado, bacon, cilantro, and sriracha mayo.

source, so [we said]: We are interested in investing in this kind of solution with you. His model is: I would like to grow this crop and get paid 100 percent at the time of delivery. And our model is: We want to meet with you halfway and pay a certain amount at seeding, at delivery, and as we use it. It's an interesting conversation. It's an example of how you have to have to figure these things out together so that there is a shared comfort level, risk, and benefit.

The average Diablo Burger costs \$9. What feedback do you get from your customers about the price?

One of the reasons that Diablo Burger is a burger joint rather than a steakhouse is that I personally was turned off by the idea that local food had to be exclusive. The reality is that we are in a national and global context of all food costs going up because fewer and fewer people are growing food for more and more people. The cost of commodity food is artificially low and going up. The cost of what I call artisanal food is organically high and going down. It's a question not of price but of value.

And yet, we live in an economic context of 99 percent of the population living hand to mouth. Making a decision on a value rather than a price-point comparison is not always feasible. But I have had families with kids come to me and say, "The difference between spending \$47 for a family of four eating at Diablo Burger versus \$39 for a family of four eating at McDonald's is a comparison that deeply favors spending the extra \$8 here."

We fight this fight for the right reasons—for the good of the greater community, not just the good of that small percentage of the population who are price insensitive when it comes to feeding themselves. It needs to be inclusive, accessible. It needs to make sense to someone who is counting pennies.

What would you like to see change or grow in local food?

Connecting local supply and demand is the end goal. If Diablo Burger can show that the local community would rather eat local beef than commodity beef, [hopefully] somebody with greater capacity and deeper pockets would say, we need to have a local processing facility. I want to demonstrate that local supply and demand can be connected, and connected with greater efficiency.

I think you help create that connection through public/private partnerships. You say, "If we had a processing facility here in Pima County, it would create X number of jobs, it would connect local supply with local demand." There would be this economic multiplier effect of forging those connections. That takes vision and courage.

The reality is also that things are changing. These problems that we're up against in Arizona are problems that are true across the country. We're all trying to figure them out. Diablo Burger is in our seventh year, and in that time so much has changed in terms of awareness, interest, language. The value of trying to do it, struggling to do it, is in these little microsteps forward. Again, compared to the efficiencies and numbers in the commodity market, it's a drop in the bucket. But the drops add up over time. We want to nudge the world, one local food meal at a time. ❖

Diablo Burger. 312 E. Congress St. 520.882.2007. DiabloBurger.com.

Megan Kimble is the managing editor of Edible Baja Arizona and the author of Unprocessed: My City-Dwelling Year of Reclaiming Real Food.



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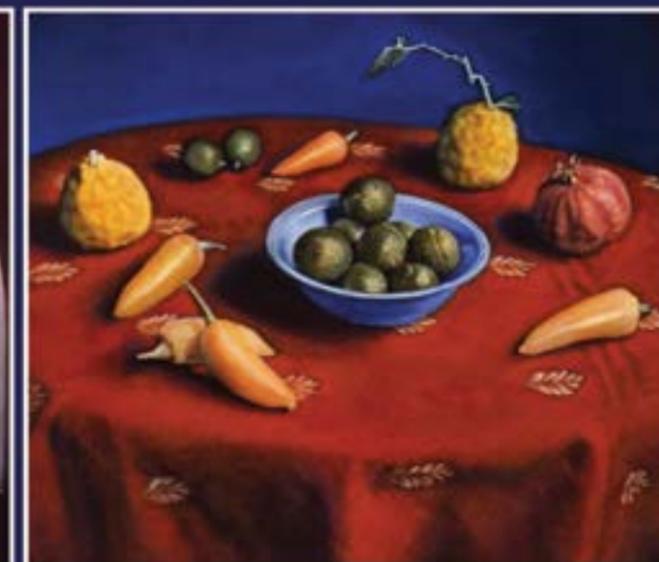
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