



Photo: Robert Strickland

On an unassuming street in Brownsville

the

Welcome to

TACO

CAPITAL

of

Texas

By  
JOSÉ R.  
RALAT

it's nearly impossible to eat a bad taco

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**ARMANDO VERA'S STOIC FACE** lights up with a smile when customers mention how far they've traveled to eat at his restaurant, Vera's Backyard Bar-B-Que. Patrons make sojourns from Dallas, Austin, and even El Paso to order pounds of his *barbacoa de cabeza de res a la leña en pozo*—beef-head barbacoa slow-cooked over mesquite in an in-ground pit that's 7 feet long and lined by bricks. The restaurant was established by his father in 1955 on Southmost Boulevard in Brownsville. Vera is tall and blocky with a mustache that has yet to sprout gray hairs. He's an imposing figure—even when he's sitting at a table, readers perched on the bridge of his nose beneath the brim of his mesh ball cap, reviewing receipts. He'll scan the dining room filled with out-of-towners (locals tend to get barbacoa to go) sitting gleefully over clumped threads of smoke-kissed meat. And they know the best way to eat barbacoa is in a taco: wrapped in an aromatic corn tortilla and sprinkled with chopped white onion and cilantro and a splash of red or green salsa.

Vera's is reason enough to travel to this corner of Brownsville locals call "La Southmost." The actual name of the nearly 4-mile road near the Rio Grande is Southmost Boulevard. Here, dozens of Mexican restaurants, tortillerias, and taquerias are wedged between grocery stores, dentist offices, ice cream shops, churches,



Barbacoa from Vera's Backyard Bar-B-Que.



and a hodgepodge of other businesses. It's where you'll find some of the best tacos in the state of Texas. "It's a source of pride for us," Vera says.

I don't make this claim lightly. I started writing about tacos professionally 10 years ago. First at the *Dallas Observer*, and then for my own website, [thetacotrail.com](http://thetacotrail.com). In the last two years, I have traveled to 38 cities across the country in the process of writing my book, *American Tacos: A History of the Taco Trail North of the Border* (out in early 2020 by The University of Texas Press). From my experience, no single geographical area in the Lone Star State has tacos as uniformly excellent as La Southmost—and that includes Oak Cliff in Dallas, Airline Drive in Houston, the East Side of Austin, and South Jackson Road in Pharr.

The tacos you'll find on Southmost come in three varieties: breakfast tacos, fried tacos, and beef tacos. Trying them all is essential. Breakfast tacos go by the name *tortillas de harina* because of the 10-inch flour tortillas they're served in. They're typically filled with ingredients as familiar as chorizo and eggs, or as regionally specific as weenies (sliced Vienna sausages or hot dogs) and eggs. Fried tacos, like *tacos dorados* (deep-fried folded corn tortillas) and flautas (rolled and fried), are also popular—some are drowned in salsa, earning the moniker *ahogados*. Most prevalent are the beef preparations like barbacoa, *bistek* (thinly sliced), fajita, and *mollejas* (sweetbreads). They're generally smaller in size and served in orders of three to six—closer to what most Americans would recognize as "street tacos."

So start your fast: You're going to need as much room and time as possible to get a true taste of Southmost. These seven taquerias—vetted from many days of repeat visits—are great places to start your grand tour of this South Texas taco haven.



## The APPETIZER

*Frijoles charros* are indicative of Southmost and the greater Rio Grande Valley area. They are served ahead of meals in most taquerias and restaurants. The soupy pinto bean-based appetizer is swimming with soft shards of bacon, onion, cilantro, and whatever else the cook throws in.



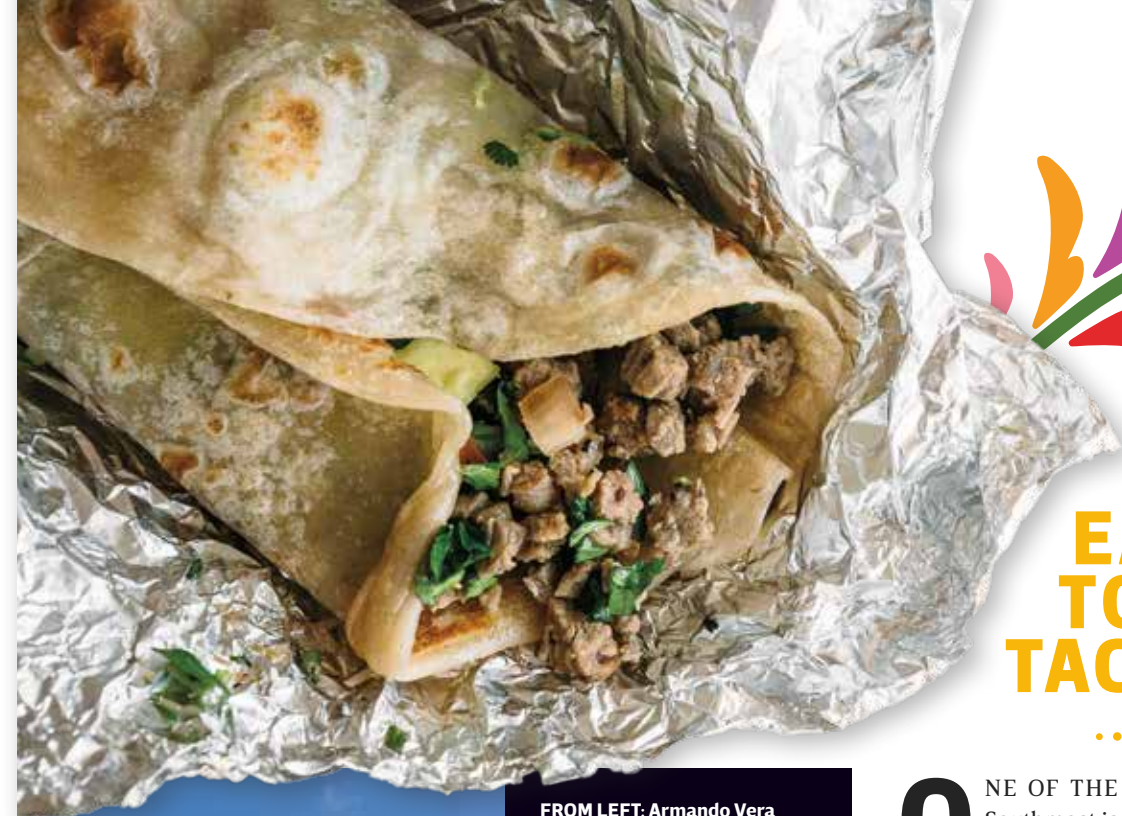




## VERA'S BACKYARD BAR-B-QUE

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**B**ARBECUE PILGRIMS TREK TO VERA'S because it's the last of its kind—the only restaurant in Texas where barbacoa is prepared in the traditional manner. They come to get a glimpse of Vera working the counter, where he does things the old-school way. And he'll do so until the very end. "I'll probably die here," Vera says, chuckling. Other establishments that practiced the pit-cooking method have either gone out of business or shifted to cooking in large steamers or ovens in compliance with reformed health regulations. Nevertheless, barbacoa remains a way of life here, a vestige of South Texas' cattle-ranching heyday, when Mexican ranch hands would cook discarded calf heads after a week's hard labor. The prepared meat would then be taken home for family meals. Today, barbacoa is often eaten on Sundays. (Vera's opens Friday through Sunday and only for breakfast and lunch.) Businesses like Vera's see a rush ahead of and immediately after the day's church services. The restaurant offers barbacoa in several cuts: *lengua* (cow tongue), *cachete* (beef cheek), *paladar* (palate), *ojo* (cow's eye, which Vera calls "Mexican caviar"), *surtida* (general bits), and *mixta* (the beef-head meat after the other parts have been taken out). Go for the mixta. 2404 Southmost Blvd. 956-546-4159



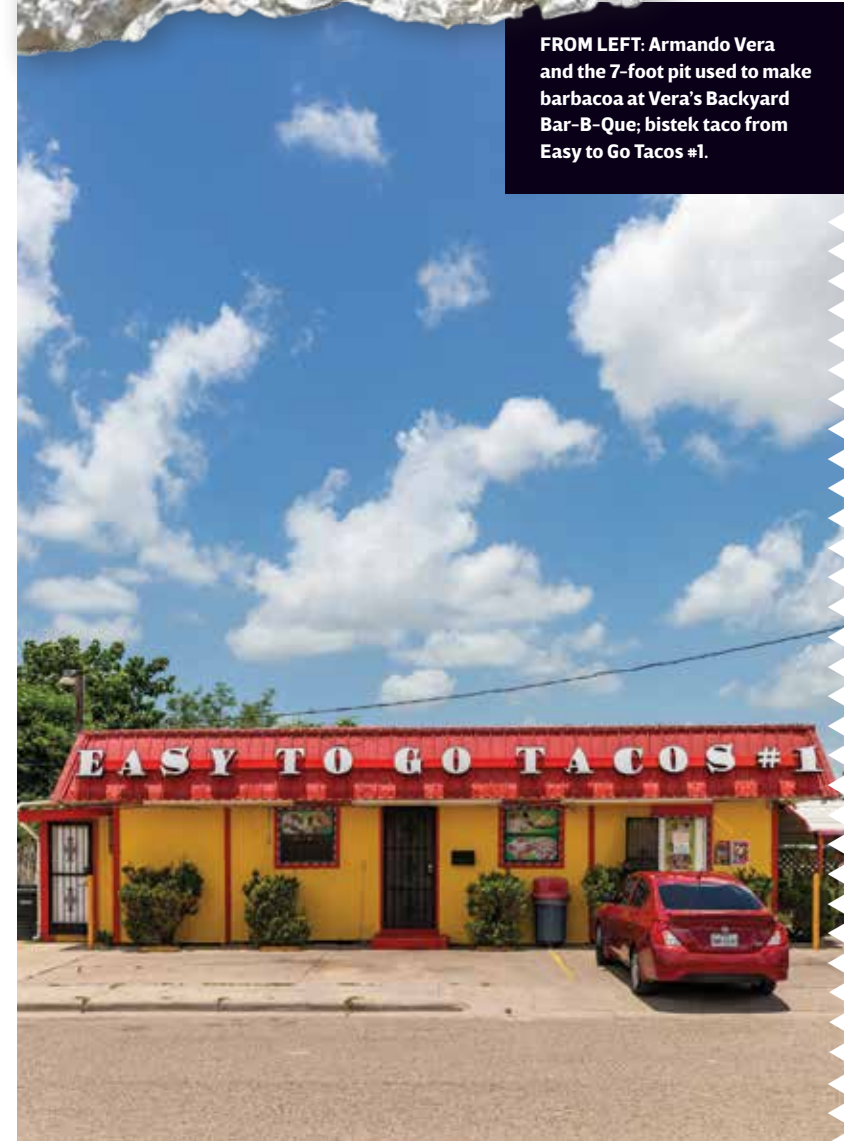

## EASY TO GO TACOS #1

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FROM LEFT: Armando Vera and the 7-foot pit used to make barbacoa at Vera's Backyard Bar-B-Que; bistek taco from Easy to Go Tacos #1.

**O**NE OF THE OLDEST TAQUERIAS ON Southmost is Easy to Go Tacos #1, located across the street from Vera's. When Teodas Martinez and her son-in-law Cipriano Mejia opened Easy to Go in the 1970s, Southmost was little more than a road squeezed by shotgun houses and working-class bungalows. They saw a niche in the market that needed filling—there wasn't a neighborhood taco spot yet.

"Easy to Go Tacos was the first taco place on Southmost," says co-owner Daniel Garces III. Garces' mother, Maria, was a cook at Easy to Go and purchased the concept from the original owners in 1992. "In essence, it started the boom," he adds. In the nearly 30 years since the Garces family took over the business, Easy to Go has expanded to six locations in Brownsville, Los Fresnos, and Harlingen. "Now, there is a lot of competition," says Daniel's father, Daniel Garces Jr. And yet, the restaurant endures. "Customers keep coming back because they claim they can't find our unique flavor in other locations, no matter how hard they try," the younger Garces says. That special flavor is evidenced in dishes like the flautas that come with a side of *cueritos* (pickled pig skin)—the snappy, sour brightness cuts through fierce salsa. 2344 Southmost Blvd. 956-542-4592



Photos: Kenny Braun (opposite page, bottom); Robert Strickland (top)



## The GARNISHES

Almost all beef tacos come topped with a flurry of crumbled or grated white cheese and a wedge of soft avocado. "If you try to sell tacos without avocado and cheese, people are not going to buy them," says Armando Vera of Vera's Backyard Bar-B-Que. These garnishes are elemental to the borderlands. They are as characteristic of Brownsville as they are of Brownsville's sister city, Matamoros, Mexico. Southmost is the center of the Venn diagram of what is considered typical of two countries.



## TACO EL COMPADRE

**D**OWN THE STREET FROM EASY TO GO, TACO EL COMPADRE'S MENU DECORATES its interior. Along the rear wall hangs a long poster of photos of the dishes with their respective names in yellow-outlined bold green font. The small dining room's tables are covered in red tablecloths with rainbow-striped runners protected by thick plastic sheets kinked at the corners. Ask for the flautas, which the cooks plate in stacks beneath a thicket of cabbage speckled with crumbled white cheese and a scratchingly spicy salsa roja that holds everything in place; and the tacos dorados, filled with a mashed potato-chicken combo and bathed in thin salsa. 3915 Southmost Blvd. 956-542-5727

## SYLVIA'S RESTAURANT

**O**N THE FURTHEST NORTH PART of La Southmost, Sylvia's Restaurant is covered in Dallas Cowboys memorabilia like autographed posters, Super Bowl championship flags, jerseys, and figurines. If it's got a blue, silver, and white star stamped on it, the super-fan owners have given it a home. Sylvia's serves its barbacoa in a large, sweet, buttery flour tortilla. For those craving other delights, the *carne guisada*—stew meat in earthy gravy—makes for a comforting taco, as does the *machacado con huevo a la Mexicana*, dried and pulverized salt beef scrambled with eggs and topped with pico de gallo. 1843 Southmost Blvd. 956-542-9220

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:  
Bistek tacos at Taco el Compadre;  
Cowboys-centric décor at Sylvia's;  
tacos rojos at Las 7 Salsas.

## LAS 7 SALSAS RESTAURANTE

**T**HIS RESTAURANT'S INTERIOR, LIKE El Compadre's, is adorned with its menu options. The tortillas de harina selection is myriad. Among the best are the *carne guisada* with wide slices of carrots, fraying chunks of beef, and unevenly chopped potatoes; the smoky barbacoa; and the weenies with soft-scrambled eggs. *Tacos rojos* are a popular selection in the borderlands—red corn tortillas are stuffed with the filling of your choice, and topped with tomato, lettuce, and crumbled white cheese. 3424 Southmost Blvd. 956-407-8426

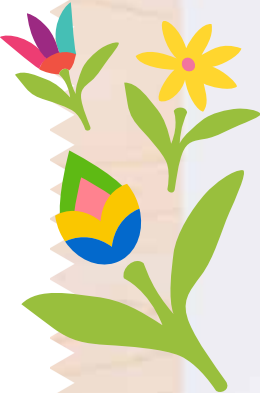




# MARCELO’S TACOS

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**Y**OU’LL KNOW YOU’VE FOUND THE PLACE WHEN YOU SEE THE GOOGLY-EYED salivating taco mascot painted on a wall facing the parking lot. Although Marcelo’s serves typical Southmost tacos, its *guisados*, or home-style stews, are truly spectacular. Try the stellar *rajas con queso*, sliced and roasted poblano chiles cooked down into a stew of cream and white cheese in a choice of corn or handmade flour tortilla. It is as hearty as barbacoa, but with a brighter flavor and a stirring aroma. Fill out your order with a couple of the staff’s suggestions—they’re particularly proud of their *taco al pastor* (spit-grilled pork). 3305 E. 26th St. 956-546-0021



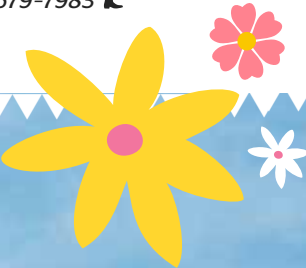
Various tacos, including barbacoa and rajas con queso, at Marcelo’s Tacos.

# TACOS PKCHÜ

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**A**T THE END OF LA SOUTHMOST TACO DISTRICT, A TRULY outstanding taqueria awaits. Tacos Pkchü operates out of a stout orange trailer emblazoned with the image of Pika-chu, the cute, mouse-like Pokémon character. Owner Pablo Aviles opened his mobile rig in April 2017 at an auto body shop and mechanics garage beyond where the road turns south toward the border. Aviles, who has the short manner of a confident man accustomed to quick, hard work, decided to establish his trailer here because of the neighborhood’s reputation. “Southmost is known best for its tacos,” he says in Spanish before explaining he’s not afraid of the competition. “The other guys are good, but Pkchü’s are the best.”

Here, the bistek tacos bear chopped, griddled, and juicy beef. The filling is light, a touch salty, and generously coated with queso fresco. Passed through the trailer’s window on a rectangular Styrofoam plate, Tacos Pkchü’s tacos don’t look much different from the others served along Southmost, but they are exceptional—and further evidence that Southmost has distinguished itself from Texas’ other taco corridors. 5727 Southmost Blvd. 956-579-7983



Photos: Robert Strickland



## And IF YOU’RE STILL CRAVING more TACOS...

Here are some additional spots on Southmost that are sure to leave you fully satisfied, if not downright comatose:

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### Brownsville Coffee Shop #2

Get your first tortillas de harina of the day and a cup of coffee here before venturing farther into La Southmost.

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### Otro Rollo

The tacos al pastor are served in a unique way: rolled at the center in wax paper, resembling a large sushi hand roll, in order to help soak up the grease.

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### Taqueria La Vaquita 4

Order the tostadas, which are flat, crispy tortillas topped with a mound of beef, onion, cilantro, and avocado buried under white cheese.

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### Tacos Matamoros #2

Find more beef tacos at this dependable local chain.