

By Eric Cormier
photos by Jo Vidrine

LET'S


TACO

ABOUT IT

The taco scene in the region is heating up and we've found the top taco joints for getting your fix — with all of the fixins






 Jose Rodriguez, owner of La Espuela Mexican Grill, is a purist and proud of it. "A soft tortilla, filling, diced onions, cilantro and lime. That's it! And you know what? A lot of people are liking them that way."

South Louisiana's finger food terrain — which for decades has been dominated by boudin — has a new feature compliments of Mexico.

Tacos! From Vinton to Lafayette and all the way down south to Morgan City, tacos are being served at Tex-Mex restaurants, taquerias and food trucks.

What South Louisiana food lovers have realized is that American-based taco franchises may be good for the wallet, but the products prepared may leave a flavor-hunting palate wanting. Hard corn tortillas filled with cheese, lettuce and mass-produced cooked ground beef and sauces are as American as the proverbial apple pie. Kudos to Taco Bell founder Glen Bell who realized the hard tortilla made by his Mexican food competitors in San Bernadino, California (1948) could be a multi-billion dollar food find.

Fast forward to 2020 where the Bayou region is home to many Mexican-influenced eateries with tacos being the calling card for most of them. Which begs the question, who reigns supreme in preparing tacos?



Jose Rodriguez started La Espuela Mexican Grill 18 months ago in St. Martinville. Tacos Texanos, a best seller, is a corn tortilla filled with strips of steak and chorizo.

As with the long-standing debate over the best boudin — which actually ends up being a regional contest between wet, liver, offal and rice produced in many Acadiana meat markets versus spicy, dry rice and pork prepared around Lake Charles — the best tacos start with deciding what style is preferred.

Tex-Mex, Cali, Louisiana-esque or Mexican street tacos are your choices. After deciding the style, it would be wise to visit five restaurants that are proud of their taco making skills: Que Pasa Taqueria in Lake Charles, Taco Sisters in



CHOOSE YOUR FILLING AND ENJOY



Al Pastor
 spicy marinated pork cooked on a rotisserie

Chorizo
 Mexican sausage

Carnitas
 spiced and braised pork



Asada
 grilled steak

Barbacoa
 steamed and shredded beef

Lengua
 stewed beef tongue



Pescado
 marinated and grilled fish

TACO PURVEYORS WORTH VISITING

Bon Temps Grill (fish)

1211 W. Pinhook Road
Lafayette
337-706-8850

La Papa Loca (pastor)

1403 Eraste Landry Road
Lafayette
337-354-3726

La Pagua Mexican Restaurant (pastor)

5423 Johnston St.
Lafayette
337-988-1312

Blue Apache (flounder)

3558 W. Pinhook
Lafayette
337-837-7720
905 Savoy Road
Youngsville
337-857-5155

Rosita's (asada)

2401 E. Napoleon St.
Sulphur
337-533-9077
3669 5th Ave.
Lake Charles
337-302-5581

Victoria's Taqueria (barbacoa)

1004 Broad St.
Lake Charles
337-436-5124

Si Señor Mexican Restaurant (pastor)

1201 Belleview St.
Morgan City
985-412-6780



Que Pasa's fried fish and shrimp tacos are served with shredded cabbage, black bean and corn salsa with Louisiana remoulade sauce on top.



Que Pasa
owner **Darren Martel** describes his taco creations as "Baja, California twist with our little hint of Louisiana which we are proud of."

Lafayette, Pedros Taco and Tequila in Lafayette and Opelousas, Luna De Noche Mexican Restaurant in Carencro, and La Espuela Mexican Grill in St. Martinville.

Prior to taking a taco tour, you will be surprised to know that the taco is Mexico's version of the sandwich. Also, the Mexican food item's origin is possibly more interesting than a guy sitting at a gambling table and asking for some meat between slices of bread, but we thank John Montagu, the fourth Earl of Sandwich, for his namesake.

Dr. Jeffery M. Pilcher, a Minnesota University professor who is affectionately known as the 'Taco Whisperer,' surmised in a smithsonian.com article entitled "Where Did the Taco Come From?" (May 2012) that "the origins of the taco are really unknown. My theory is that it dates from the 18th century and the silver mines in Mexico because in those mines the word 'taco' referred to the little charges they would use to excavate the ore. These were pieces of paper that they would wrap around gunpowder and insert into the holes they carved in the rock face."

Another theory about taco's beginnings involves eyewitness accounts from explorers who ventured to the New (actually lived in and populated) World. According to the "What's Cooking America" website, in the story "Tortilla and Taco History," the taco is regarded as a generic term for a "tortilla wrapped around a filling."

The article also states, "When Spanish Conquistadores made landfall in the Americas in 1519, they saw Aztec residents eating corn-based bread which would later be coined tortilla." Writer Sophie Avernin referenced the observations of Bernal Diaz Del Castillo (1496-1584) in "Tackling the Taco": A Guide To the Art of Taco Eating" when she wrote, "The first 'taco bash' in the his-

tory of New Spain was documented by none other than Bernal Diaz del Castillo. Hernan Cortes organized this memorable banquet in Coyoacan for his captains, with pigs brought all the way from Cuba. It would, however, be a mistake to think that Cortes invented the taco since anthropologists have discovered evidence that inhabitants of the lake region of the Valley of Mexico ate tacos filled with small fish, such as acociles and charales. The fish were replaced by small live insects and ants in the states of Morelos and Guerrero, while locusts and snails were favorite fillings in Puebla and Oaxaca," the article states.

With that brief taco culinary history lesson completed, let's advance to a grilled, chewy, spicy and juicy morsel-filled taco adventure. Remember, taco preparation in the Acadiana region is based upon passion and the fusion of Mexican, Tex-Mex and other cultural influences.

Cali-Louisiana Style

Taco Sisters in Lafayette and Que Pasa Taqueria in Lake Charles are owned by people who love everything Louisiana, California and Mexico. Both eateries specialize in preparing flavorful foods that titillate tastebuds.

At Taco Sisters (tacosisters.com), the smoked shrimp taco will get flavor-hunters' mouths watering with anticipation. This taco consists of Louisiana Gulf shrimp which are marinated in Taco Sisters' "secret sauce" and smoked. As the menu states, "It's all the flavor of bacon-wrapped shrimp — without the calories."

Brett Hall, a member of the restaurant's ownership group, provides even more preparation detail. "The shrimp have a simple rub then we toss some olive oil on them and stick in the smoker. We have a tedious rotation system





An hour west, in Lake Charles, Que Pasa (quepasataqueria.com) owner Darren Martel describes his taco creations as “Baja, California twist with our little hint of Louisiana which we are proud of.”

Years ago, Martel visited Mexico City to learn the nuances of street tacos. “Our group tried tacos all over the city. We kept finding specific elements in the tacos which were cilantro, chopped onions, filling over soft corn tortillas. That flavor pattern just really hit us hard. We loved it and tried to figure out a way to make our own.”

What Martel and his restaurant staff ended up with in regards to taco preparation has led to the creation of a loyal customer base in the Lake City. Tacos at Que Pasa are exotic yet familiar in flavor pattern and appearance for locals. Lake Area residents enjoy spicy food and appreciate Latin spices in Tex-Mex cuisine.

Que Pasa’s street tacos are served on soft corn tortillas with the choice of chicken fajita, beef fajita or shredded pork, diced onions, chopped cilantro and black bean and corn salsa.

Martel has also spent a lot of time in the Baja region of Mexico and in San Diego, the historical homes of fish tacos. He says Que Pasa’s seafood-inspired tacos pay homage to their counterparts in SoCal (Southern California).

Both the fried fish and shrimp tacos are served with shredded cabbage, black bean and corn salsa with Louisiana remoulade sauce on top.

Martel’s eatery was damaged by Hurricane Laura last August, but with the help of employees and their families, contractors, and supporters, they were able to open to the public in mid-September.

“I’m happy we were able to bring joy to people’s hearts,” Martel said. “Our city and friends came together for us. Yes, we are open to selling tacos!”

of pans and it takes about an hour and half to smoke them. Hickory or oak are the woods we typically smoke with.”

Taco Sisters originally started 10 years ago when Katie and Molly Richard ventured into a restaurant endeavor inside a small building located in Freetown. Recipes developed by the women then are still used today. The business grew and eventually, it was sold to a partnership consisting of Hall, Brendan Akers and Jon and Lynn Jenkins.

Taco Sisters is dubbed by the team as California tacos with a Cajun twist. Owners and staff are sticklers for preparing high-quality dishes patiently and with high-quality products.

“One of our favorite tacos is smothered brisket in a smoky chipotle red wine adobo sauce. The meat is braised 10 hours. Also, we have smoked pork tacos and the meat has a simple rub of Creole seasoning and brown sugar. It is smoked three to four hours and braised for four or five hours. When served on a taco the pork gets brown sugar glaze on it,” Hall said.

Every taco is prepared with a greens mix consisting of Romain and spinach, shredded cabbage, and Granny Smith apples.

“Taco Sisters is about the slow food movement. Everything you order we start making when we get the ticket,” Hall said.



BEST APPS

1

CHORIQUESO

La Rumba Mexican Grill in Sulphur

Chorizo, onions and cilantro mixed in queso dip. This is spicy and addictive with or without tortilla chips. A bowl of this concoction is worthy of being the entree.

2

GUACAMOLE

Tacos San Luis in New Iberia

Many customers insist that the food out of the kitchen here is real Mexican. The staff takes time in preparing the guacamole that ends up on most dishes.

3

SALSA

Barandas Mexican Grill in Broussard

Salsa and chips is a staple in any Latin restaurant. The owners here make sure that when their scrumptious salsa gets to your table, it is spicy, the way it should be.



Taco Sisters is dubbed by the team as California tacos with a Cajun twist. Owners and staff are sticklers for preparing high-quality dishes patiently and with high-quality products.



The smoked shrimp taco consists of Louisiana Gulf Shrimp which are marinated in Taco Sisters ‘secret sauce’ and smoked.





BEST DRINK

1

MARGARITA

El Dorado Mexican Grill in Lake Charles

This eatery presents the wonderful opportunity to eat outside overlooking Lake Charles with the region's best frozen margarita in hand.

2

SANGRIA MARGARITA

La Pagua Mexican Restaurant in Lafayette

A margarita mixed with a fruity wine elixir is decadent. This cocktail will take the edge off and cool the palate after eating spicy salsa and other Latin inspired vittles.

3

BLOOD ORANGE MINT MARGARITA

Tula Tacos and Amigos in Lafayette

Just uttering the words prompts the mind to think of cocktail heaven. Taste the drink and experience bliss.



Mayer insists that her tacos should also be served with only three sauces: homemade verde, diablo (chiles and tomatoes) and a spicy habanero.

Traditional Purists

What Taco Sisters and Que Pasa are to American interpretations of tacos, Pedros Tacos and Tequila (locations in Lafayette and Opelousas), Luna de Noche Mexican Restaurant in Carencro and La Espuela Mexican Grill in St. Martinville provide in authentic Mexican street tacos. The majority of those restaurants' ownerships and staffs have connections south of the border.

Luna de Noche Mexican Restaurant (luna-de-noche-restaurant.business.site) has garnered lots of attention due to the kitchen skills of owner Doris Mayer. Originally from Acapulco, Mayer opened the restaurant 18 months ago after

spending more than two decades cooking for other restaurateurs. She aims to prepare tacos reminiscent of her homeland.

"We eat real tacos, Mexican street tacos like they have in the market and in homes," she said. "At the restaurant, we make our tacos from scratch."

Mayer's pastor tacos are the end result of almost 12 hours of preparation that starts with pork marinated in guajillo pepper and other spices.

"We roast those peppers first and soak them in water. Then we put in fresh garlic that has been roasted, achiote, fresh sour oranges and other spices and marinate the meat 10 hours. It is then steamed while wrapped in banana leaves," she said.

The restaurant's barbacoa tacos preparation includes the same commitment to detail and passion.

"Beef shoulder, guajillo pepper and different spices in the marinade like vinegar, other peppers and cloves. The meat is wrapped in avocado leaves and cooked until the meat falls off," Mayer said.

The tacos are served on soft tortillas with white onions, cilantro and lime with a side of charro beans and poblano sauce.

Mayer insists that her tacos should also be served with only three sauces: homemade verde, diablo (chiles and tomatoes), and a spicy habanero.



Luna de Noche Mexican Restaurant has garnered lots of attention due to the kitchen skills of owner Doris Mayer. Mayer's pastor tacos are the end result of almost 12 hours of preparation that starts with pork marinated in guajillo pepper and other spices.





Julio Ortega is the general manager of Pedros (pedros-tacosandtequila.com) and prefers original Mexican taco preparation. Orgeta agrees with Martel that the key ingredients to Mexican street tacos are "cilantro and onions."



Julio Ortega, general manager of Pedros prefers original Mexican taco preparation. The key ingredients to Mexican street tacos are cilantro and onions.

"We do Taco Tuesdays for \$2 and sell hard tacos with ground meat. But that is not Mexican; it is Tex-Mex," he said.

People interested in original Mexican street taco preparation should try the eatery's chicken taco served with cabbage and sauce on flour tortillas. Pastor tacos (seasoned grilled pork) and grilled shrimp tacos are feature items that any taco lover would be smart to purchase.

All are served with cilantro, onions and lime. Jose Rodriguez started La Espuela Mexican Grill 18 months ago in St. Martinville. His taco creations have caught the attention of residents who pride themselves on preparing Cajun, country Creole and soul food delicacies.

Originally from Guadalajara, Mexico, Rodriguez came to the bayou country intent on sharing food close to his heart.

"Oh yes, I want to make [tacos] like they are made back home. There is a certain spice mix and freshness that I am accustomed to and that is what I aim for when preparing tacos here," he said.

One of Rodriguez's best sellers is Tacos Texanos which is a corn tortilla filled with strips of steak and chorizo and served with grilled onions, a jalapeno, Mexican rice, cilantro, tomatillo sauce and lime.

His a purist though and proud of it. "A soft tortilla, filling, diced onions, cilantro, and lime. That's it! And you know what? A lot of people are liking them that way." ■



BEST DESSERTS

1

SOPAPILLAS
Que Pasa Taqueria in Lake Charles

A hybrid Latin favorite, the sopapillas here are warm and flavorful. Entertain the tastebuds with powdered sugar or cinnamon on top.

2

CHURROS
The Churros Boutique in Lafayette

How many ways can churros be served? Visit the boutique and count the ways. Start with the churro fries then explore gourmet churros with different toppings.

3

TRES LECHES
Pedros Tacos and Tequila Bar in Opelousas

Sometimes, the menu says it best, "ultra-light white cake soaked in a sweet milk mixture, topped with whipped cream and cinnamon." Need we write more?



People interested in original Mexican street taco preparation should try the Pedro's chicken taco served with cabbage and sauce on flour tortillas.



"PURIST" TACO ANATOMY



Lime



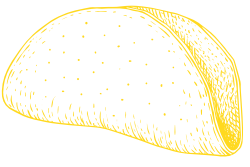
Onion



Cilantro



Protein



Tortilla



Hailing from the state of Guerrero, which is bordered by the Pacific Ocean on the west coast, Mayer loves seafood-based tacos which she proudly placed on the menu.

"Our Baja taco is wonderful. It is fried tilapia dressed in lettuce, pico de gallo, cotija cheese and served in a flour tortilla," she said.