

FORK IN THE ROAD



DIGITAL VISION PHOTO

The Baja-style fish taco has been re-imagined by cooks and high-end chefs in the San Diego area, but at its core it must be fried in beer batter and served on a corn tortilla.

Outpost of the Baja taco

In San Diego, various interpretations raise this fish-based street food’s delicious profile

By **STEVE DOLINSKY**
Special to Tribune Newspapers

SAN DIEGO, Calif. — Many college kids come home from spring break with a wicked sunburn and a few good stories to tell. Ralph Rubio came back with an idea that would spawn an empire. As a freshman in 1974, the Los Angeles native traveled down Mexico’s narrow Baja Peninsula to the fishing town of San Felipe on the Gulf of California. Besides the cheap beer and ambrosial views, he noticed entrepreneurial vendors hawking fish tacos, made from whatever was caught that day.

“I realized all these gringos were enjoying it, so why don’t I just open one myself back home,” the gregarious 58-year-old told me over a plate of tacos recently.

It took him a few years — and about \$15,000 — but in 1983, Rubio opened his first stand along Mission Bay Drive. Today there are 195 Rubio’s in five states, stretching as far east as Denver.

The Baja-style fish taco has been reinterpreted and re-imagined by dozens of cooks and high-end chefs in San Diego, but at its core, it’s hard to argue with its basic DNA.

“A true Baja-style taco must be fried in beer batter, on a corn tortilla,” said Candice Woo, the San Diego editor for Eater.com. “A grilled fish taco is just the So-Cal way to be healthy.”

This typically means a mild whitefish, such as tilapia or mahi-mahi, cut into 2- or 3-inch-long pieces, dredged in beer batter with a few secret “extras” (Rubio dunks Alaskan pollock into a thick mess spiked with black pepper, oregano, mustard and garlic). Once fried to a golden brown, the strip is set onto a griddled corn tortilla purchased from a local tortilla shop (no one makes theirs from scratch on site — note to would-be entrepreneurs). Then the holy trinity of toppings: a mound of shredded cabbage; a crema or creamy white sauce of mayo and sour cream, thinned with water; plus a bold red salsa or pico de gallo, lending a note of heat. A few wedges of fresh lime are de rigueur for a jolt of citrus.

I spent the better part of a weekend tasting more than half a dozen versions of fish tacos in and around San Diego; the only trouble was sorting through all of the recommendations.

The taco is, by nature, a street food. So what better place to start than at the Mariscos El Pescador truck, which has been driving



STEVE DOLINSKY PHOTOS

The tonier fish tacos at Club M at the Grand Del Mar Resort are battered with Karl Strauss Amber Lager.



The smoked tuna taco at TJ Oyster Bar is chopped like a hash and mixed with white onions and cilantro.



At Fish Public, “street tacos” are made with grilled rockfish, a slaw of Napa cabbage and radish.

around the area since 2008? Woo directed me to a spare parking lot jammed between Interstate Highway 5 and a series of train tracks in Chula Vista, just south of San Diego and about 7 miles north of the Mexican border. The family who runs it is from Ensenada, another well regarded fishing town, so the tacos hew to the Mexican ideal: fried tilapia on griddled corn tortillas, crowned by shredded cabbage, pico de gallo and crema. Total investment: \$1.25.

Grab one of the three plastic white chairs, or just eat it along a narrow ledge connected to the truck. Most folks eat them in their cars. On the weekends, when they sell more than 1,000 tacos, you’re as likely to see Jaguars and Mercedes from Rancho Bernardo and La Jolla as you are pickup trucks from the less affluent suburbs. Like a lot of stands, you can get

them grilled or even made with shrimp, but don’t forget the free consomme while you wait. This heady, earthy, fish-rich stew would be right at home in a New England fish shack.

A few miles east of Chula Vista, in Bonita, TJ Oyster Bar is tucked away in a tidy strip mall. It’s mostly counter seating here, and there’s always a line stretching out the door. They were using swai, a whitefish I had never heard of, on the day I visited for their beer-battered taco. But I would also recommend the smoked tuna version, which is chopped like a hash and mixed with white onions and cilantro.

In the Pacific Beach neighborhood north of downtown, I stopped at Fat Fish Cantina Grill for a fried cod taco covered in colby and jack cheeses, cabbage and ranch sauce, served on a choice of flour or corn tortillas. It

paled in comparison, however, to the beauties I devoured at Oscar’s Mexican Seafood in Pacific Beach. Those were the product of Tijuana native Juan Montes De Oca, who used to be a truck driver. He had met Oscar Valenzuela in 2009 and instantly fell in love with his food.

“His tacos reminded me of San Felipe and Ensenada,” said Montes De Oca. So Montes De Oca bought Valenzuela a food truck, allowing him to follow his heart back to Mexico to start a business, then opened Oscar’s Mexican Seafood here in 2011. It’s easy to see why there’s already a third location in the works: Shrimp is cleaned and deveined throughout the day (turnover is high); fish is never frozen, and sides of chipotle or habanero mayo offer creamy heat. Wedges of fresh avocado usually are scooped onto the tacos here, and if you choose to

Where to go

Club M at The Grand Del Mar, 5200 Grand Del Mar Way, San Diego; 855-314-2030; thegranddelmar.com/club-m.

Fat Fish Cantina Grill, 4474 Mission Blvd., San Diego; 858-490-2877; fatfishcantinagrill.com.

Fish Public, 4055 Adams Ave., San Diego; 619-281-4014; fishpublic.com.

George’s at the Cove, 1250 Prospect St., La Jolla; 858-454-4244; georgesatthecove.com.

Mariscos El Pescador Truck, 1008A Industrial Blvd., Chula Vista.

Oscar’s Mexican Seafood, 703 Turquoise St., San Diego; 858-488-6392; oscarsmexicanseafood.com.

Rubio’s, 195 locations (149 in California), rubios.com.

TJ Oyster Bar, 4246 Bonita Road, Bonita; 619-267-4577; tjoysterbar.com.

get your fish grilled, it arrives on a corn tortilla blanketed in melted Monterey jack cheese.

Tonier versions exist farther up the coast at the Grand Del Mar Resort. At Club M, chef Ernest Lopez taps into his childhood, sticking to the script: a trio of excellent fish tacos battered with Karl Strauss Amber Lager and served with a vibrant homemade salsa while overlooking the golf course; in La Jolla, George’s at the Cove deconstructs them on the tasting menu by draping raw ahi tuna with fried avocados and fresh lime supremes, surrounding the composition with crushed Corn Nuts.

But one of the most simple and straightforward expressions I found was in the quiet Kensington neighborhood, sandwiched between an art house theater and a pizza joint. At Fish Public, chef Jordan Davis makes “street tacos” with grilled rockfish, a slaw of Napa cabbage and radish, plus fresh avocado, salsa verde and a chipotle crema, all served on a corn tortilla no wider than a baseball. Every bite is full of crunch, heat, creaminess and, of course, the taste of fresh fish and corn. Did I mind that they weren’t fried? Of course not. It was one of many great catches on the San Diego scene.

ctc-travel@tribune.com

5 great restaurants for 5 great museums

Whether you are planning a romantic dinner or just looking for a spot to grab a light meal during your next museum day, the members and editors of VirtualTourist.com have scouted the top five museum restaurants.

1. Musee d’Orsay Restaurant at Musee d’Orsay, Paris: Housed in a former train station, the museum holds some of the greatest artistic treasures from 1848 to the mid-20th century. Attached to the station was a luxury hotel, the dining room of which was preserved and turned into the museum’s primary restaurant. With gilded ceilings and ornate chandeliers, it is just as dramatic as when it opened more than 100 years ago.

The restaurant hosts a special Thursday evening deal, which includes a discovery menu, drinks and entrance to the museum’s collections for 55 euros.

2. The Modern at MoMA, New York: Few restaurants can boast a Michelin star or three stars from The New York Times, and The Modern at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) has both. part of chef Danny Meyer’s Union Square Hospitality Group, it serves French-American cuisine with Alsatian influence. The Dining Room at The Modern serves a prix-fixe menu.

3. Collections Cafe at Chihuly Garden and Glass, Seattle: Located in Seattle Center, Chihuly

Garden and Glass spans 1½ acres and provides an overview of the career and work of glass artist Dale Chihuly. The Collections Cafe is the venue’s primary eatery. The decor highlights Chihuly’s passion for collecting, including his vintage accordions. The menu is inspired by Chihuly’s travels, with ingredients and wines sourced from the Northwest.

4. Ray’s and Stark Bar at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles: Nearly 3 years old, Ray’s is a Californian take on museum dining. In the center of the BP Grand Entrance, the restaurant is open to the courtyard, providing great people watching and alfresco dining. With an on-site garden and a wood-burn-

ing oven and grill, the restaurant’s cuisine emphasizes farm-to-table, seasonal fare.

5. Acropolis Museum Restaurant, Athens: Most travelers to Greece plan to visit ruins, but what about admiring them during a delicious meal? The Acropolis Museum is less than 1,000 feet from the Acropolis itself, on the pedestrian walkway of Dionysiou Areopagitou Street, the central route for archaeological sites.

This location makes it a great place to grab a bite after a long day of exploring the ruins. The menu includes hot dishes based on traditional Greek favorites.

— *McClatchy-Tribune News Service*



MUSEE D’ORSAY PHOTO

The Musee d’Orsay Restaurant once was part of a luxury hotel and retains its past glory.