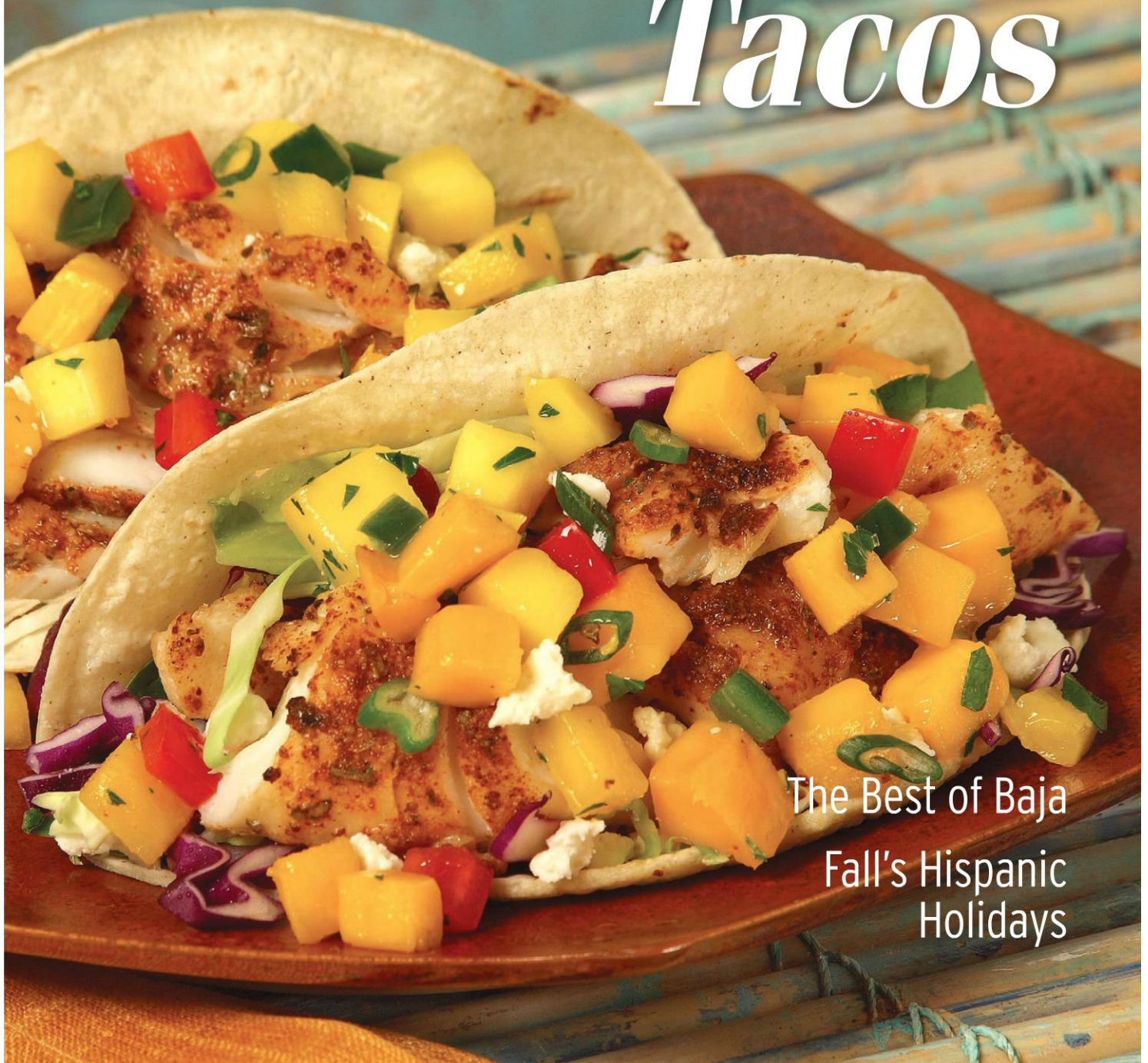


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A New Take On Tacos



The Best of Baja
Fall's Hispanic
Holidays

A NEW TAKE ON

Creative fillings
are transforming a
staple Mexican
menu offering

Tacos



Baja Fish Tacos
with Mango Salsa
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Painted Burro's
chorizo de la casa
taco (near right)

Taco-Tequila-
Whiskey's
Cricket Taco
(far right)



| BY JAY LYON | Tacos—an almost ubiquitous item on Mexican restaurant menus—have come a long way since the days they held little more than ground beef and cheese. Chefs are heating up today's foodservice scene with tacos that put a creative spin on commonly found fillings.

San Francisco, Calif.-based restaurant and hospitality consulting company Andrew Freeman & Co. even included tacos on its list of 2015 top food trends, noting that chefs including James Beard Award winner Sean Brock are honing in on traditional tacos. (Brock opened the casual Mexican eatery *Minero* last October in Charleston, S.C., his hometown.)

A STORIED PAST

With National Taco Day coming up October 4, it's a good time to take a look back—and a look ahead—to this favorite Mexican food.

While the exact origin of the taco is unknown, Jeffrey Pilcher, author of *Planet Taco: A Global History of Mexican Food*, theorizes it dates to Mexico's silver mines. There, miners referred to the charges used to mine ore, which were simply pieces of paper wrapped around gunpowder, as "tacos." (The name of Brock's restaurant, *Minero*, is a nod to the origin of the taco.)

In Mexico, taquerias were originally concentrated in working-class neighborhoods. Industrialization brought new concentrations of workers to central locations, introducing these foods to a new audience.

The Americanization of the taco in the early 1900s was essentially a process that involved making this common Mexican food item with ingredients like ground beef and cheddar cheese that were readily available from America's processing plants.



CREATIVE TACO MENUS

Today, restaurateurs are moving away from mass production and taking a page from the gourmet burger movement. From coast to coast, they're incorporating more unique flavors and ingredients into their taco offerings.

In Chicago, Cookies & Carnitas offers tacos with ingredients ranging from slow-cooked pork shoulder to Amish chicken and crispy portobello mushrooms. Birrieria Zaragoza specializes in goat tacos filled with meat that is marinated in a red

mole and roasted before it's pulled apart, soaked in a consommé, and served with soft tortillas.

In other Chicago taco news, sushi mainstay Kamehachi and famed pizzeria Lou Malnati's recently announced plans to debut Buzz Bait Taqueria in August, with a focus on fish fillings. Selections include tacos with smoked salmon, sweet barbecue sauce and corn salsa; Sapporo beer-battered cod with mango salsa; and tuna poke with avocado-tomato salsa.

Quick service and fast casual chains are embracing the taco craze, too, moving beyond what recently has been a burrito-dominated landscape.

Taco Bell, for example, opened the more upscale U.S. Taco Co., in August 2014. Taco options include the Big Stud Spud (potato and cheese, with molcajete salsa and poblano crème slaw); Winner Winner (crispy chicken, jalapeño Southern gravy, roasted corn pico de gallo); One Percenter (lobster, garlic butter, red cabbage slaw, and pico de gallo); and the Literally Grilled Cheese (grilled Manchego cheese, molcajete salsa, grilled peppers and onions with avocado, cotija and cilantro).

And Velvet Taco, with locations in Dallas-Fort Worth and Chicago, was featured in Zagat's "7 Innovative Tacos in Dallas" list in April 2014 for "...inventive tacos ranging from the Fried Elvis (fried bananas, cashew butter, applewood smoked bacon and arugula salad) to the Sonoran (crema, avocado pico, bacon, queso fresco and Valentina hot sauce on a hot dog)."

*"Tacos are blank canvases that can hold everything from the freshest produce to slow-cooked pork and house-made sauces. By **paying close attention to seasonality**, we are able to offer guests something bright and fresh regularly, ensuring that our tacos never fall into typical conventions."*

— **ALEC RIVEROS**, director of operations, Alpine Restaurant Group/Painted Burro, Somerville, Mass.



Painted Burro's
Baja Fish Taco

*“I really wanted to do something with fried chicken, so we came up with our **Pollo Agave taco**. We brine chicken for an hour, then dip it in flour and fry it. Then we dip it in agave nectar, put it on a tortilla with a house-made slaw, and drizzle it with a Mexican chimichurri.”*

— KEVIN MORRISON, owner, *Tacos-Tequila-Whiskey*, Denver

TACO SUCCESS IN DENVER

Independent purveyors are also offering their own creative spin on the taco. In 2010, Kevin Morrison turned his Denver food truck operation into a freestanding taco shop. After working at a Chicago restaurant, the Indiana native moved to Colorado with plans to open an Italian restaurant in Aspen and a produce company in Denver.

“Tacos were actually my second choice,” says Morrison. “Burgers

were originally Number One. But as I looked at the market, it was inundated with burgers. They were everywhere.”

Morrison saw a void in the Denver market, and grabbed it. “Tacos just spoke to me. They were all around—in magazines, on the Food Network—everyone was eating tacos.”

In the first year, Morrison sold his tacos out of a food truck, mainly at farmers’ markets, where he got a lot of feedback. “We worked on a busi-

ness plan, and then Westword [the Denver-based alternative newsweekly] gave us their first-ever Best Food Truck award. Business just took off.”

In October 2011, Morrison opened Tacos-Tequila-Whiskey, his first brick-and-mortar business. “We started with 12 different tacos. I wanted to do Mexican street food, but with a ‘gringo twist,’” Morrison recalls. “A good example is our lengua taco. It’s beef tongue that’s triple-cooked. First, we boil it, then we braise it, and then we sear it so that it’s served crispy. We add a guajillo honey mayo that adds a little sweetness to the taco.”

Morrison finds inspiration in different places. When a food writer friend suggested that he put a cricket taco on the menu, Morrison agreed to give it a try. With insects commonly served in Mexico, it wasn’t too big a stretch.

“Insects are big in Guadalajara—crickets, grasshoppers, worm eggs. We started the cricket taco as a special on weekends, and it was a hit. We pan roast the crickets, and serve them with our chile de arbol salsa. We still run it as a special. It’s a crunchy protein that takes on the flavor of what you cook with it.”

The carnitas taco—crispy roasted pork served with pickled red onions and an avocado crema—is Morrison’s favorite, although he’s also partial to the hongos taco (grilled shitake, crimini and oyster mushrooms, griddled cotija cheese, creamed cilantro corn, and ancho chili crema).

Vegetarians make up a surprising number of today’s taco eaters, Morrison adds. “Aside from the hongos, another vegetarian favorite



Painted Burro's
Shrimp Taco

is the Queso a la Plancha: griddled cotija cheese, avocado, roasted tomatillo salsa, and lime.”

Overall, though, Tacos-Tequila-Whiskey’s best-seller is the traditional asada taco made with citrus-marinated skirt steak, avocado, diced onion and cilantro, cotija cheese, and lime.

Morrison’s advice for restaurateurs looking for inspiration with their taco offerings? “Find inspiration everywhere. I’ve been influenced by traveling, by reading trade magazines, even watching the Food Network.”

Watching what other chefs are doing—even if it isn’t taco-related—also gives Morrison ideas. “I really wanted to do something with fried chicken, so we came up with our Pollo Agave taco. We brine chicken for an hour, then dip it in flour and fry it. Then we dip it in agave nectar, put it on a tortilla with a house-made slaw, and drizzle it with a Mexican chimichurri.”

BOOSTING TACO BUSINESS IN BOSTON

Far to Denver’s east, in suburban Boston, creative taco presentations are also surging.

“When building our tacos we aim to avoid the typical flavor profiles

that many expect. We also use locally sourced ingredients coupled with traditional Mexican cooking styles and spices to create a one of a kind experience,” says Alec Riveros, director of operations for Alpine Restaurant Group, which runs Painted Burro in Somerville, Mass. The goal there “...is to impart our local chef driven styles into modern interpretations of Latin American cuisine with a strong respect for tradition,” Painted Burro’s website says.

The restaurant’s menu changes seasonally, based on what’s fresh, but also showcases staples that are always in demand.

“While you will see variations of the classics on our menu, like our Baja-Style Fish Taco, you will also see unique iterations of street food like our Roasted Beet Taco with Sautéed Swiss Chard, Goat Cheese Crema and Spiced Pepitas,” Riveros says. “We typically feature eight taco variations nightly, which include a blend of staples, like our Chorizo de la Casa taco, as well as seasonally rotating options like our Crispy Calamari taco.

“Tacos are blank canvases that can

hold everything from the freshest produce to slow-cooked pork and house-made sauces,” Riveros continues. “By paying close attention to seasonality, we are able to offer guests something bright and fresh regularly, ensuring that our tacos never fall into typical conventions.”

Painted Burro’s Chorizo de la Casa taco (chorizo, potatoes, an egg “soleado” and chipotle mayo), has always been a customer favorite. “Our Gulf Shrimp Diablo Rojo with guacamole, habanero and mango salsa is another one that is really popular,” Riveros reports. “Also recently, in part due to the warmer weather, we have seen an increase in sales of our Crispy “Baja-Style” Fish Taco, with pickled cabbage, jalapeño slaw and house made Baja crema.”

Like Morrison, Riveros says experimentation and seasonality help to shape creative new menu items.

“When coming up with new and unique tacos, we first zero in on what’s in season. From there we use our creativity to build out tacos that we would want to eat,” Riveros explains.

“For instance, our BLT & Cheese taco is one of the more unique items we have and features crispy pork belly, pico de gallo con limon, romaine, ‘salsa mil islas,’ and cotija for a fun twist on the classic deli sandwich.”

MARKETING TIPS

How are restaurants encouraging patrons to try new twists on tacos?

Painted Burro menus tacos individually, not as a complete plate. “We find that it gives our guests the opportunity to try several types of tacos and increases the likelihood that rather than sticking to something they know they’ll try something new since they’re just committing to a single taco,” says Riveros. “Pricing the tacos individually allows guests to customize their taco experience and ensures that we can continue to provide the freshest ingredients since each taco is priced to cover the overhead.”

Regular taco specials are also part of Morrison’s and Riveros’ marketing approach. “We are constantly featuring photos of our tacos on social media and regularly offer nightly taco specials to keep things interesting,” Riveros explains.

Mercadito Restaurants in Chicago and Las Vegas take creative approaches to boosting taco sales, as well.

“We use these hashtags when posting on social media —#the taco that changed my life, #let’s taco about it, and #kiss my guac—Mercadito Corporate Chef Aldo Ayala says.

Mercadito also participates in the No Kid Hungry Campaign with its year-long Tacos for Strength promotion. According to Ayala, Mercadito features a signature taco of the month created by guest chefs, then donates a percentage of the profit to No Kid Hungry. A recent example: the Pastrami Kung Pao Taco that Chef Rodelio Aglibot, known as “The Food Food Buddha,” created for Mercadito Chicago & Red Rock Las Vegas locations.

Jay Lyon is a Chicago-based freelance writer, taco lover, and frequent contributor to *el Restaurante*.