

/eat & drink listings

»navigating THE NEW MEXICAN

FRESH TAKES ON BORDER CLASSICS

BY MARISSA TINLOY

With a wave of creative new Mexican eateries entering the city and a whole slew of longtime favorites, it's no surprise that Los Angeles has been dubbed the new Mexico of the culinary world. Whatever "new" may signify—a new venue, a new flavor, a new way of working with old ingredients, a new awareness of health and eating options—you can bet L.A. is on it.

Border Grill

This fun and flavorful urban canteen shows that Mexican food can be light, healthy and vegan/vegetarian-friendly. No lard here—just a trendy, colorful environment and gourmet twists on already zesty south-of-the-border tastes. Inventive favorites of the venue's owners (Mary Sue Milliken and Susan Feniger aka the Two Hot Tamales) include grilled fish tacos with cucumber-citrus slaw, a wild-mushroom quesadilla with manchego and cotija cheeses, and plantain empanadas packed with black beans and pobano peppers. 1445 4th St., Santa Monica, 310-451-1655

Casa

Casa, Downtown's new cocina and cantina, effortlessly embraces both the colorful spirit of Mexican cuisine and L.A.'s au courant trendiness. With an informal lunchtime taqueria menu, a gourmet dinner menu and a cocktail lounge with strong Mexican-flavored concoctions, chef Kris Morningstar's Casa makes guests feel right at home—with *abundigas* (pork and beef *mestizos*), *conejo* (braised rabbit with chestnuts) or *cochinita pibil* (black-bean puree, citrus-marinated onions and cilantro). Fiesta seekers can top off the evening with a nifty twist on the original Mexican beer cocktail: *una cerveza sangrita* (house-made sangrita, Corona, Herradura silver tequila and a salted rim). Salud! 350 S. Grand Ave., Downtown, 213-621-2249

CJ's Cafe

CJ's serves Mexican and soul food—the two ultimate comfort cuisines combined in one ultra-cozy, adorable and impossible-to-stereotype Mid-City cafe. Try the classics from both cultural spectrums: heavy-set *habevas rancheros* or spicy *pollo a la plancha*, plus fried cutfish, black-eyed peas or collard greens served with grits. Only in L.A.! 5501 W. Pico Blvd., Mid-City, 323-936-3216

Coyote Cantina

This cantina brings together the best of two Mexican traditions: good food and good drinks. Choose from an extensive menu offering inventive dishes such as chicken-pineapple quesadillas, ahi salad with habanero-citrus dressing and turkey jalapeño enchiladas. Have a round (or rounds) of one of Coyote's 60-plus fine tequila labels and pretzels you're in Oaxo. 531 N. Pacific Coast Hwy., Redondo Beach, 310-378-1066

Fresh Corn Grill

In honor of its namesake, this sunny, healthy Westwood spot tops nearly every dish with fresh produce. Grilled corn (a staple down south—think corn tortillas, corn-husked tamales, sweet corn soup) appears atop bean-laden tostada salads and grilled salmon specialty plates. It's informal, delicious and an inventive way of going south on L.A.'s Westside. 1510 Westwood Blvd., Westwood, 310-470-0414

Frida Taqueria

Nestled in the cutesy Brentwood Country Mart, Frida Taqueria presents new-wave Mexican (fresh produce, lighter ingredients) in a very old-fashioned environment (the Mart's classic red barn, which dates back to 1948). Combining the stand's sassy Mexican tastes and the throwback atmosphere, Frida is thriving—and it's no surprise given the tasty rib-eye tacos and Resplendor de Mango salad. 225 28th St. Ste. 14, Santa Monica, 310-366-9666

Hugo's Tacos

Hugo's puts a twist on notions of the traditional hole-in-the-wall taqueria with a taste-provoking menu that includes not-so-common condiments, such as *salsa cruda* and honey chipotle. The "salsa burger," typically made with all-restaurant Angus beef, can be made double, veggie or double-vegie—not something you see every day in the world of Mexican food. Stuff those sandwiches fat with zucchini, corn, string beans, potato or soy chorizo. Ay, papá! 3300 Glendale Blvd., Atwater Village, 323-664-9400



Hot stuff: Border Grill's orange-and-jalapeño margarita

Loteria Grill

A longtime Original Farmers Market favorite, Loteria has found itself a second thriving location and a hefty responsibility—bringing nuevo Mexican grub to the heart of Hollywood. Lucky for all, the new space is airy and bright, and the tasty, unpretentious fare stays true to the



Home cooking: huaraches @ Casa

original outpost. 6627 Hollywood Blvd., Hollywood, 323-465-2500

Pink Taco

Pink Taco merges Mexican food with punky, trendy rock 'n' roll. The atmosphere is loud and vibrant, the food is California-zad, and the crowd is completely Angeleno. Try the *panuchos* (the eponymous pink tacos), authentically imported from the Yucatan region and complete with pickled pink onions and avocado. 10250 Santa Monica Blvd., Century City, 310-789-1000

Primera Taza

One cup at a time, Primera Taza is bringing internationally renowned (and delicious) hot beverages to Boyle Heights. Opened by a neighborhood native, the hip spot for a cup of Joe offers not-so-average bean and tea varieties from Mexico, plus other worldly destinations, including Guatemala, Ethiopia and Brazil. The spot's succulent pan dulce (sweet bread) is baked fresh daily at the nearby La Faventa. (No surprise—it's also a neighborhood favorite.) 1852 E. 1st St., Boyle Heights, 323-780-3923

Rivera Restaurant

Rivera is modern Mexican from head to toe. The ambience exudes L.A.-sleek, and the menu beckons with icy mojitos and margaritas and a Latin sashimi bar. Salsa and

sushi—does life get any better? New to the Downtown scene, Rivera already feels right at home. 1050 S. Flower St., #102, Downtown, 213-749-1450

Sky's Gourmet Tacos

Mexican soul food is on the rise. Another place of Southern flavor fusion—think Mexico meets South Carolina—Sky's makes tacos that are strangely reminiscent of slopp. Joes and lobster combos complete with a sweet-hot down-home "sassy sauce." The Sky's the culinary limit. 5408 W. Pico Blvd., Mid-City, 323-932-6253

Taco Liama

It might not be new, but Taco Liama is certainly central to the thriving taco-burrito-torta contingent. As the real deal in a competitive market, this stand stands out with handmade tortillas, lusciously tender meat (try the lamb and caritas), and salsa worth a stop. 7344 Van Nuys Blvd., Van Nuys, 818-901-1898

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