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BEST PLACES TO EAT IN OC



PHOTOS BY BRAD A. JOHNSON — STAFF

A mesquite charcoal-grilled chicken taco at Lola Gaspar in Santa Ana, one of the top places for the dish in the OC.

TACOS

NOT JUST FOR TUESDAYS



A chile relleno is placed inside a taco with shrimp-stuffed chile guero on a guajillo-infused tortilla at Chato's Bar & Grill in Santa Ana.

Critic Brad A. Johnson breaks down the top 50 places to find the perfect Mexican food staple

By Brad A. Johnson
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For the past six years, my annual compendium of the Best Places to Eat in Orange County has featured everything from tacos to French haute cuisine. And every year I've come away questioning, "Should I have included more tacos?"

Well, I finally cracked. Since 2021 was not normal, neither is this year's guide. Allow me to present the (long-overdue) 50 Best Places to Eat Tacos. It's an eclectic list that weaves a trail from smoke-filled parking lots in Anaheim to the hushed, serene confines of luxury stalwart Taco Maria in Costa Mesa. It's an exploration of tacos al carbon, barbacoa, birria, buche, carne asada, carnitas, cecina, chicharones, lengua, suadero and more.

And I still find myself

thinking, "Should I have included more tacos?" Even 50 seems like too small of a number for a county that sprawls across 948 square miles and presumably has more taquerias than gas stations. On the bright side, some of these restaurants have extra locations or multiple trucks, so the truer tally is more like 69. Meanwhile, stay tuned: My traditional guide to the 75 Best Places to Eat returns next spring.

1 LOLA GASPAR During that innocent summer prior to the pandemic, Lola Gaspar closed for a short break while chef/owner Luis Perez took a sabbatical in Mexico City.

He came back freshly inspired and completely revamped the menu (previously influenced by Spain) to focus on a very limited selection of tacos and quesadillas stuffed with tender, sultry lamb birria, spicy jerk-marinated

TACOS » PAGE 8

NEW MEXICO

Baldwin says he is talking to police

Actor is fully cooperating with authorities following fatal gunfire during the filming of new movie

By Julia Jacobs, Glenn Thrush and Brooks Barnes
The New York Times

On a ranch in northern New Mexico, where the cottonwoods and dusty foothills have formed the backdrop of Westerns since the 1950s, Alec Baldwin was filming a new movie that hinges on an accidental killing and its aftermath.

Now law enforcement officials are investigating what happened on the set of the movie "Rust" on Thursday when, they said, Baldwin, who was playing an outlaw, fired a gun being used as a prop — killing the film's cinematographer, wounding its director and raising new questions about firearms safety on film sets.

Baldwin was handed a loaded weapon by an assistant director who indicated it was safe to use in the moments before the actor fatally shot a cinematographer, court records released Friday show.

The assistant director did not know the prop gun was loaded with live rounds, according to

SHOOTING » PAGE 7



Baldwin

SEXUAL ABUSE

USA Gymnastics, survivors agree on settlement of \$400M

By Scott M. Reid
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USA Gymnastics and a survivors' committee representing women who were sexually assaulted by former U.S. Olympic and national team physician Larry Nassar and Olympic and national team coaches have filed a proposed \$400 million settlement agreement with the U.S. Bankruptcy Court Southern District of Indiana.

In what both sides view as a major breakthrough in the nearly three-year bankruptcy case, USA Gymnastics and the survivors' agreement on the proposed \$400,659,129 settlement as part of a reorganization plan follows a week of increasingly acrimonious discussions between



Nassar

SETTLEMENT » PAGE 7

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Poised to cash in on Super Bowl

Analysts predict big NFL game at SoFi Stadium will generate \$447.5M

By Kevin Smith
ksmith@scng.com

Football fans, eager to move past the paltry pandemic Super Bowl last winter, are expected to spend millions of dollars when the big game rolls into town in February, a phenomenon one Southland official called "revenge spending."

Amid lingering COVID-19 restrictions and with the delta variant still in play, it's tough to accurately predict a winning turnout for Super Bowl LVI.

One study predicts Los Angeles

STADIUM » PAGE 11



WILL LESTER — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

SoFi Stadium, seen during the Rams' first regular season game in September, will host Super Bowl LVI in February.

PANDEMIC

Pfizer: COVID-19 vaccine over 90% effective in kids

By Lauran Neergaard and Matthew Perrone
The Associated Press

Child-size doses of Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine appear safe and nearly 91% effective at preventing symptomatic infections in 5- to 11-year-olds, according to study details released Friday as the U.S. considers opening vaccinations to that age group.

The shots could begin in early November, with the first children in line fully protected by Christmas, if regulators give the go-ahead. That would represent a major expansion of the nation's vaccine drive, encompassing roughly 28 million elementary school-age youngsters. Details of Pfizer's study were



PFIZER VIA AP

Child-size doses of Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine provide about a third of a dose given to adults. The U.S. is studying them.

posted online. The Food and Drug Administration was expected to post its own review of the company's safety and effectiveness data later in the day.

Advisers to the FDA will publish

VACCINE » PAGE 11

INDEX

Business A16 | Coronavirus tracker A5 | Local A3 | Obituaries A12
Comics C3-4 | Focus A17 | Lottery A2 | Puzzles C2,4-5

TODAY'S FORECAST

Coastal: High 69/Low 56
Inland: High 73/Low 55
Full weather report A15

Customer Service: 714-796-7777

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The pollo a las brasas taco at Fonda Moderna in Tustin has grilled chicken and is slathered with chile adobo.



A pineapple-marinated skirt steak taco at Pour Vida in Anaheim.



The crispy trompo tacos at Tortas Ahogadas La Guerra in Santa Ana.



Crispy tripe, chicharrones and lengua tacos at Los Reyes del Elote Asado in Santa Ana.



Chicken tacos dorados at Jugos Vallarta in Santa Ana.



Beef birria tacos at La Súper Birria in Santa Ana.



A chicken asado taco with griddled cheese at Puesto in Huntington Beach.

Tacos

FROM PAGE 1

nated chicken and chorizo negro, a blood sausage made by nearby Electric City Butcher that Perez combines with pinto beans, all of which are stuffed into some of the finest tortillas available in Orange County (flour for the tacos, corn for the quekas). On Tuesday nights, Perez and crew fire up a charcoal grill on the edge of the patio, filling the neighborhood with smoke for an even more limited menu of outstanding carne asada, grilled chicken and shrimp tacos. The micheladas and cocktails are best in class, especially a mezcal drink called El Viento.

211 W Second St., Santa Ana, 714-972-1172, lolagaspar.com.

2 CHATO'S BAR & GRILL

Chef Sergio Ortega, who originally launched Descanco in Costa Mesa, has taken over the space in downtown Santa Ana that previously housed Irenia, flipping into a Mexican bar and grill with black walls, red neon and an undercurrent of debauchery. The menu features a half dozen extremely sophisticated tacos, each a work of art. The real showstopper is the chile guero, which is a charred, hot yellow pepper stuffed with shrimp and layered with lychee-infused cabbage, a smattering of baby herbs, more sliced peppers and creamy chile-ash aoli on a terrific guajillo-infused corn tortilla. Slightly less cerebral, yet equally impressive, is the pork al pastor with roasted pineapple and velvety avocado salsa. While the flavors might be immediately familiar, these are not your average tacos.

400 N Broadway, Santa Ana, 714-852-3256, chatosbarandgrill.com.

3 FONDA MODERNA

If everybody's cecina tasted like the incredible salt-cured, air-dried flank steak served at Fonda Moderna, cecina tacos would be the most popular tacos in the world. The same might be said of the pork ribs in salsa roja. Or the pollo a las brasas, which is a marinated and grilled chicken breast slathered with chile adobo and paired with borracho beans. This bustling taqueria inside Tustin's Mess Hall market is a spinoff of chef Daniel Godínez's Anepalco restaurants in Orange, giving the chef a chance to focus almost exclusively on tacos: barbacoa, birria, ancho-rubbed wagyu steak, chicken tinga, chorizo, cochinita pibil, pork al pastor, beef stewed with ancho chiles, all served on hand-made, oddly shaped, irresistible flour tortillas. Bonus: The Anepalco crew also operates the adjacent Drink Bar inside Mess Hall, which means easy access to excellent margaritas.

1705 Flight Way, Tustin, 714-941-5418, fondamoderna.com.

4 TACOS LOS CHOLOS

What began as a pop-up for mesquite-grilled tacos al carbon in the parking lot of a seafood restaurant has morphed into a duo of wildly popular brick-and-mortar taquerias. At two locations, a large mesquite grill smolders with beef ribs, arrachera and ribeye steaks, all of which make their way into 4-inch corn tortillas with standard garnishes of onion and cilantro. The caliber of beef is excellent, some of it even USDA Prime. The best of the lot might be the costilla de res, those Flintstones-style beef ribs which are

first grilled on the bone then chopped and finished on the griddle until crispy and dripping with fat. While the newer Fullerton branch offers indoor dining only, the original Anaheim location features a sprawling patio with outdoor speakers blaring the likes of Los Tigrillos and Los Angeles Azules.

821 S. State College Blvd., Anaheim, 657-201-3043, instagram.com/tacosloscholosanaheim; 1653 W. Orangethrope Ave., Fullerton, 714-888-7360, instagram.com/tacosloscholosfullerton.

5 LA SÚPER BIRRIA

La Súper Birria has come a long way from its humble beginnings since Edgar Navarete Gomez, a self proclaimed "cooker," opened an out-of-place food stall inside his Mexican candy store in Santa Ana. Week by week, the business roles reversed until the candy store eventually disappeared, making way for a full-fledged birrieria. Two years later, there's hardly a time or day when the queue for tacos doesn't stretch through the parking lot. As the space has evolved, so has the kitchen. And while the tortillas have gone through multiple iterations and upgrades, one thing has remained constant: Gomez's spicy beef birria is as good as it gets. Pray for a miracle because parking is next to impossible.

1041 W. First St., Santa Ana, 657-245-3810, instagram.com/super_birria.

6 TACO MARÍA

The only reason Taco María doesn't rank higher is because, despite the name, this place doesn't always serve tacos. In fact, in the beginning, chef/owner Carlos Salgado didn't serve tacos at all. But over the years as he has inched this place closer and closer to fine-dining perfection, his kitchen has produced some truly iconic tacos, like the smoked sturgeon taco that is slowly, patiently grid-dled until the thick, heirloom-blue-corn tortilla is crisp and the fish inside is thoroughly heated, ready to be paired with an extraordinarily spicy salsa negra. The latest incarnation of the menu doesn't yet include a taco, but the carne asada comes with all the elements required for making one yourself: Wood-grilled steak, those same blue-gray tortillas, grilled onions and jalapeños, plus a vase of foraged herbs, including epazote, huacatay (sour mint), cilantro, papalo (looks like watercress, tastes more like tarragon) and "Mexican tarragon" (wild marigold).

3313 Hyland Ave., Costa Mesa, 714-538-8444, tacomaria.com.

7 URBANA, ANAHEIM

Chef Ernie Alvarado's dark and moody Mexican cafe (and mezcal bar) offers more than a dozen types of tacos, including arrachera, carnitas, chicken mole and even orange-glazed pork belly. But look beyond the tacos section of the menu and find the appetizer called "dorados" and that's where you'll discover crispy potato tacos, stacked like Jenga blocks and showered with shredded cabbage, pickled onions and crumbled cotija cheese. And if you enjoy mezcal, this is the place to indulge that passion.

Packing House, 440 S. Anaheim Blvd., Anaheim, 714-502-0255, urbanaanaheim.com.

8 CHAACK

With longtime chef Gabbi Patrick at the helm, Chaack has quickly become one of the most talked-about Mexican restau-

rants in Southern California. The taco options are extremely limited, but when you see something that looks or sounds like a taco, order it. At weekend brunch, look for the cochinita pibil (Yucatán-style roasted pork) — the best of its genre in OC. At dinnertime, turn to the salbute pato ahumado. The "pato ahumado" refers to smoked duck. A "salbute" is a Yucatán-style taco made with puffy, slightly crisp tortillas that are literally unlike anything else for several hundred miles. Sometimes they top the salbutes with fire-roasted turkey and those are even better.

215 El Camino Real, Tustin, 657-699-3019, chaackkitchen.com.

9 POUR VIDA

Chef Jimmy Martinez recently closed his tiny gourmet taco shop on Center Street Promenade and opened a bigger version at the end of the same block. The new location seats a whopping 50 people max — more than double the size of the original. And just like the original, most of it is outdoors. Martinez still focuses primarily on tacos. The hamburger taco — ground beef, cheddar cheese, iceberg lettuce, special sauce — is a tongue-in-cheek ode to In-N-Out. But don't think too hard about that. Just order it and get lost in the joy of a truly enjoyable taco. Also notable: mango-infused pork, vanilla-scented beef short rib and pineapple-marinated skirt steak.

215 S. Anaheim Blvd., Anaheim, 714-215-4415, pvtandt.com.

10 TITO'S LA ESPECIAL

Even in the limited realm of tacos al vapor, Tito's operates in a league of its own. There's just no one else doing Mexico City style tacos al vapor (or steamed tacos, also known as tacos de canasta) remotely like these. If you haven't tried steamed tacos before, they will be a revelation. Corn tortillas get stuffed with a choice of potato or shredded red-chile-tinged beef. The latter is succulent and tender and deeply soulful. After the tacos are assembled, they're folded, put through a steamer and utterly transformed. They emerge wet and gloriously greasy, garnished with iceberg lettuce. They look sort of like enchiladas and they smell and taste almost like tamales. Fair warning: Do not wear white when eating these tacos.

503 W. 17th St., Santa Ana, 714-543-2900; 701 N. Harbor Blvd., Santa Ana, 714-554-9871.

11 TORTAS AHOGADAS LA GUERA

This new food truck specializes in the world's messiest sandwiches, but that's a story for another day. They also make gloriously messy tacos. Ask for the "trompo tacos," which in this case translates to corn tortillas stuffed with pork al pastor and deep-fried until thoroughly crunchy. They are extravagantly garnished with a slurry of extra-spicy tomatillo salsa, guacamole and requeson, which is like a cross between ricotta and sour cream. Bring hand wipes.

1205 W. 17th St., Santa Ana, 714-376-1460, instagram.com/tortasahogadaslaguera.

12 LOS REYES DEL ELOTE ASADO

This taco trailer that parks on a residential street in Santa Ana staked its name on grilled corn in a cup and you'll want to get some of that for sure. But you'd be a fool not to focus on the tacos first. Lengua, chicharron, chorizo, tripe, cabeza, cecina, carne

asada ... this place makes some of the best tacos available on the street. The tripe is extra crispy. The chicharrones are deeply infused with charred tomato salsa and the chorizo is outstanding.

Corner of Chestnut Avenue and Main Street, Santa Ana, 949-610-4226, instagram.com/losreyesdeleloteasadooficial.

13 JUGOS VALLARTA

This 10-seat tropical juice cafe makes some of the best tacos dorados around. Focus on the version loaded with potatoes. They fill the tortillas with semi-mashed potatoes, then dunk them in a vat of hot oil, pulling them out only when the tortillas have turned golden and brittle. Garnished with shredded lettuce, a slice of tomato, a hunk of avocado and crumbled Mexican cheese. Blow on it or burn your tongue.

1312 W. First St., Santa Ana, instagram.com/jugos_vallarta.

14 TACOS LOS REYES

For years, this place was known as Carnitas Los Reyes. But then it burned down and the owners rebuilt it and changed the name to Tacos Los Reyes. Same cooks, same menu, same repetitive whack-whack-whack-whack coming from the cutting board where the cooks are constantly chopping slow-roasted pork butt (carnitas) with a giant cleaver, barely keeping pace with a never-ending demand for tacos.

273 S. Tustin St., Orange, 714-363-3730.

15 CARMELITAS TAQUERIA

The name probably rings a bell. This 20-seat taqueria is a next generation offshoot of the long-running Carmelita's in Laguna Beach. The kitchen mines the same family recipes as the parent company — carnitas, carne asada, tortilla soup, grilled corn — but with a counter-service, limited-menu concept. Notice the achiote-and-chile-marinated pork al pastor slowly pirouetting and caramelizing on its vertical spit behind the counter, capped with a pineapple that drips and glistens in the heat. That's the prize.

34255 Pacific Coast Hwy., Dana Point, 949-503-4107, carmelitastaqueria.com.

16 EL MERCADO MODERN CUISINE

The Mexico City vibes are strong at El Mercado, where chef Fernando Franco makes a fascinating vegan taco with sautéed hibiscus flowers, charred jicama, fresh pea puree and sliced avocado on a blue-corn tortilla. Not vegan? Even better. Consider the taco with stewed pork belly, roasted potato and Fresno chiles. Lots of expert tequila and mezcal cocktails, too.

301 N. Spurgeon St., Santa Ana, 714-338-2446, mercadomodern.com.

17 LINDO MICHOCAN 2

The kitchen here might be best known for menudo. But this is a prime spot for tacos, too. Carnitas, carne asada, al pastor, barbacoa, it's impossible to make a bad choice. The tortillas are made to order and they don't skimp on the meat.

327 S. Anaheim Blvd., Anaheim, 714-535-0265, instagram.com/lindomichoacananaheim.

18 PUESTO

Puesto got its start as a modest taco stand in La Jolla before morphing into a sprawling indoor/outdoor cafe in San Diego, followed by a string of sim-



PHOTOS BY BRAD A. JOHNSON — STAFF

A beef short rib en chile rojo taco at Xclusive Taqueria in Ladera Ranch. The restaurant has gone from counter-service to full-service.

Tacos

FROM PAGE 8

ilar cafes stretching from Irvine to Santa Clara. Puesto's tacos are unique. The chefs take a handful of cheese and plop it on the griddle. After the cheese melts into a blob, the taco fillings get piled on top. The whole thing is then rolled up like a crepe and stuffed into a tortilla. The chicken asado taco is one of the best chicken tacos you'll eat this year. Bonus: Outstanding margaritas and Mexican craft beers.

8577 Irvine Center Dr., Irvine, 949-608-9990, [eatpuesto.com](#); Additional locations at Irvine Park Place and in Huntington Beach and Anaheim.

19XCLUSIVE TAQUERIA MODERNA

Chefs Manny Velasco and Eddie Rivera recently transitioned their Ladera Ranch taqueria from counter-service to full-service. The menu remains mostly the same. Head straight for the chile rojo. This is a comforting guisado-style taco made with beef short rib that's been simmering slowly in a savory red chile stew. (Vegetarians beware: The menu makes no reference to beef when listing the chile rojo, but that's what it is). There's also a steller chile releno taco: corn tortilla topped with a battered-and-fried chile guero and garnished with cabbage, queso fresco and pico de gallo. You also can't go wrong with the carne asada. Plus: fantastic micheladas.

1701 Corporate Dr., Ladera Ranch, 949-339-3545, [xclusiverestaurants.com](#).

20THE TACO STAND

The carved-to-order pork al pastor is very, very good. But what's even better is the spicy shrimp taco, a contemporary riff on the gobernador in which a housemade tortilla is lined with white cheese that's been fried just to the edge of being burnt, giving it an incredibly nutty, smoky, crispy character. It's loaded with perfectly griddled shrimp and a flurry of chopped cabbage, thick chunks of avocado and a generous dollop of chipotle crema. A perfect taco by any measure.

240 W. Chapman Ave., Orange, 714-941-9164, [letstaco.com](#).

21TAQUIERO TACO PATIO

You can't miss the gigantic trompos piled with what must be at least 40 pounds of marinated chicken and pork al pastor, charring and blistering as they slowly rotate at these Tijuana-style taquerias. All the tacos, whether al pastor, carne asada or chicken asada are mopped with salsa and slathered with drippy guacamole before each cooked-to-order tortilla is folded and wrapped in a piece of paper like an ice cream cone.

4517 Campus Dr., Irvine, 949-333-1671; 5643 Alton Pkwy., Irvine, 949-529-2609, [taquiero-taco.com](#).

22TACOS LA CALLE

Suadero deserves more respect. This cut of beef is far more appreciated in Mexico than in the U.S. Cut from the upper breast area of the steer, somewhere between the brisket and the leg, it's more like fat than muscle, although the taste is indeed very meaty. La Calle makes the best suadero tacos in OC. Period.

8600 Beach Blvd., Buena Park, 714-236-5211, [instagram.com](#).

[com/tacoslacalle](#); additional locations in Orange and Santa Ana.

23ROMAN'S TAQUERIA

Two things to focus on: barbacoa de res and carnitas. Both are superb. The barbacoa is tender and deeply infused with charred red chiles. The carnitas are dizzyingly fatty and flavorful. The tacos here are large. A grown man could have a hard time eating more than two. Warning: Roman's salsas are radioactive, namely the darkest red one (chiles japones) and the bright green one (pure serrano).

2400 Newport Blvd., Costa Mesa, 949-548-5534, [instagram.com/romans_taqueria](#).

24TACO RIGOBERTO'S BROS.

The window of this taco trailer opens at 3:45 p.m. and by 4 p.m. the queue already will be swelling 20-people deep. These are old-school street tacos at their finest: chicharrones in salsa verde, lengua, crispy tripe, carne asada, chicken asada, chorizo. You'll be asked, "You want everything?" Say yes and no matter what type of tacos you order they'll come topped with chopped cabbage, onions, cilantro and both red and green salsas. Bonus: There are picnic tables directly in front of the trailer.

201 S. Mountain View St., Santa Ana, 714-401-4871, [instagram.com/tacosrigobertosbros](#).

25TAQUERIA EL ZAMORANO

Nobody makes better Baja-style shrimp tacos than El Zamorano. The shrimp are beer-battered and fried to a crisp and paired with shredded cabbage and a generous glug of dressing that tastes like Thousand Island, but with a kick. Also noteworthy: pork al pastor, carne asada and tacos dorados.

925 W. Warner Ave., Santa Ana, 714-884-4073, [taqueriaelzamorano.com](#); also a truck at the corner of 17th and Mabury streets in Santa Ana.

26TACOS MANUEL

This is the brick-and-mortar culmination of a company that operates three tacos trucks under the same Manuel banner, and the kitchen isn't much bigger than that of a truck. They serve everything just as they would on the street corner: On reusable plastic plates covered with tinfoil. The invigorating scent of sizzling carnitas and carne asada permeates every inch of the tiny dining room. Everything here is good: carnitas, carne asada, al pastor, birria... (See also: Carnitas Don Alberto. Same family.)

1612 W. Katella Ave., Anaheim, 714-643-0592, [plus trucks in Costa Mesa, Santa Ana and Perris](#).

27TACOS Y BIRRIA EL GUERO

The goat birria is good, but the pork al pastor might be even better. Taqueros carve the barbecue pork to order from one of OC's largest trompos, which sometimes measures more than 2 feet wide. Go easy on the smoky salsa negra. It is dangerously hot.

2330 W. Edinger Ave., Santa Ana, 714-241-8226, [instagram.com/tacosybirria_elguero](#).

28SOL AGAVE

This is a success story of a taco truck that became a mini chain of full-service restaurants. The atmosphere might be dramatically different, but the



A pork al pastor taco with a Keto shell at Taquero Taco Patio in Irvine.

tacos are as satisfying as ever; the chicken tacos dorados especially. The carnitas are an event all their own, almost enough for two people to share.

111 Avenida Del Mar, San Clemente, 949-312-2210, [solagave.com](#); additional locations in San Juan Capistrano and Mission Viejo.

29ERICK EL TAQUERO

First one truck. Then two. Now three. Same great tacos at all. Ultra-tender suadero is seared in its own fat until it turns crisp around the edges. On weekends, they sometimes set up a trompo outside the truck and carve excellent pork al pastor. Warning: Don't light a match near the salsas — the entire block might blow.

100 Goetz Ave., Santa Ana, 714-795-4066, [instagram.com/erick_el_taquero](#); plus two additional trucks, also in Santa Ana.

30TAQUERIA DON VICTOR 2

Their surtido is legend. Surtido is essentially loaded carnitas, an assorted mix of all the bits and pieces of the pig that are cooked together with the pork butt when making carnitas. Also, check out the chorizo, which is deep-fried by the link then transformed into tacos. And one more thing: Ask for the not-so-secret, off-menu Mexico City-style quesadilla, which is like a giant taco made with a freshly pressed 10-inch corn tortilla that's stuffed with chicharrón prensado (compressed chicharrones), garnished with shredded lettuce and queso fresco.

1225 S. Euclid St., Anaheim, 714-535-6018, [instagram.com/taqueria_don_victor_anaheim](#).

31TACOS TJ STYLE

This Tijuana-style taco brand has grown to three trucks, all of which feature a revolving trompo of the same excellent pork al pastor in the side window, which acts like a powerful bat signal after sundown. Also great: the lengua. In typical TJ style, everything gets slathered with guacamole.

13912 Enterprise Dr., Garden Grove, 714-334-6358, [instagram.com/tacostjstyle](#); additional trucks in Santa Ana and Costa Mesa.

32TAQUEROS

The best crispy tacos require an appreciation for grease because the perfect shell

isn't fried until hard and dry, but rather still semiflexible and only crisped around the edges. That's how they do it here before stuffing those perfect shells with finely chopped chicken still hot from the griddle, plus shredded lettuce, tomato and grated cheese. On weekends only, they fire up the trompo with al pastor.

31401 Camino Capistrano, San Juan Capistrano, 949-542-4052; 28251 Marguerite Pkwy., Mission Viejo, 949-429-2774, [taquerosmexicanfood.com](#).

33COBIAN'S RESTAURANT

The best thing on the menu isn't actually on the menu. Pull your server aside and ask for the off-menu street taco special and you'll receive a trio of absolutely beautiful carne asada tacos: Classic, uncomplicated, finely chopped skirt steak served on palm-sized tortillas that have been lightly griddled in oil and topped with onions and cilantro. Incidentally this is the same crew that previously operated Cafe del Sol in Los Alamitos.

4959 Katella Ave., Cypress, 657-214-2426, [instagram.com/cobiansrestaurants](#).

34LUPE'S

Lupe's signature tacos are huge, almost like open-face burritos. The fantastic Sonora taco involves a really nice flour tortilla, skirt steak, nopales, pinto beans, pico de gallo and guacamole. The pork al pastor is excellent and they don't skimp on meat. Bonus: The coconut margarita is absolutely brilliant. Just know that the Dana Point location is the only outpost of this concept that serves alcohol.

33621 Del Obispo St., Dana Point, 949-558-5430, [eatlupe.com](#); additional locations in Huntington Beach and Lake Forest.

35EL CAMPEON

This old Mexican butcher shop, bakery and taqueria has been around almost as long as the nearby historic San Juan Capistrano mission, serving the best workman's tacos in south Orange County. They have a 20-foot-long steam table filled with every imaginable filling: beef barbacoa, pork al pastor, chile verde, goat birria, tripe, cow's tongue, pig's ears, you name it. The al pastor is always superb. So, too, the barbacoa.

31921 Camino Capistrano, San Juan Capistrano, 949-489-
TACOS » PAGE 10



Lengua, tripe, chicken and carne asada tacos at Taco Rigoberto's Bros in Santa Ana.



A crispy chicken taco at Taqueros in San Juan Capistrano.



Carne asada street tacos at Cobian's.



The Sonora taco with carne asada, nopales and pinto beans at Lupe's in Dana Point.



PHOTOS BY BRAD A. JOHNSON — STAFF

Carnitas and pork rib tacos at Carnitas Don Alberto in Garden Grove. The restaurant plans to offer other varieties of meat in the future.

Tacos

FROM PAGE 9

4078, elcampeon.com.

36 SAUCEDO That constant thwack, thwack, thwack causing the walls to vibrate at this 24-seat taqueria is the chef frantically chopping carne asada. It never slows down. These tacos are case studies in restraint: Quality steak, onion and cilantro on basic corn tortillas, served hot and fast. And delicious. Bonus: old-school, hand-made micheladas.

12841 Chapman Ave., Garden Grove, 714-750-9254.

37 CALÓ Opened last summer, Caló is one of the hottest Mexican restaurants in the county right now. Although not a taqueria, the kitchen makes fantastic grilled fish tacos with halibut, cabbage, avocado and fresh flour tortillas. Get there early because they don't take reservations and the waiting list fills up fast. Bonus: outstanding margaritas.

28141 Crown Valley Pkwy., Laguna Niguel, 949-409-7380, calokitchen.com.

38 CARNITAS DON ALBERTO From the Tacos Manuel family comes this new taco shop dedicated to carnitas, plus pork ribs cooked in that same style, named after the family patriarch whose recipe has been closely guarded for years. The carnitas and ribs are both excellent. For now, the pork is all they serve, but I'm told plans are in the works to add additional meats in the future, although that's probably not even necessary.

12572 Garden Grove Blvd., Garden Grove, 714-640-0151, instagram.com/carnitas_don_alberto.

39 EL COYOTITO El Coyotito is a tiny cantina with a squeaky screen door and minimal air conditioning. The dining room consists of six or seven tables, plus a few stools that surround the kitchen counter where a cook and a waitress take turns pressing tortillas with an antique wooden press. The jukebox plays a mix of '70s rock, tuba-heavy Banda and crossover Mexican pop such as Julio Iglesias. The carne asada tacos are excellent. So, too, the adobada (shredded beef) and cabeza (cow's head, but mostly the cheeks).

32141 Alipaz St., San Juan Capistrano, 949-496-9439, instagram.com/elcoyotitomexican-restaurant.

40 HERITAGE BARBECUE Everybody knows by now that pitmaster Daniel Castillo makes the finest Texas-style barbecue for a hundred miles or more. But some people might not realize that his crew also makes one extraordinary Tex-Mex taco. It's a decadent creation: A flour tortilla (from Burritos La Palma) topped with a hefty slice of barbecue brisket, queso fresco, salsa verde, salsa

roja, pico de gallo and a smattering of herbs. Heck, yeah.

31721 Camino Capistrano, San Juan Capistrano, heritage-craftbbq.com.

41 SAL'S TACOS A LA MEXICANA When this place opened a few years ago, it was called Tacos del Chino. The owners recently changed the name to Sal's Tacos a la Mexicana. Nothing else changed. They still serve the same great tacos de cabeza and al pastor. And you won't find a better mulita anywhere.

2431 N Tustin Ave., Santa Ana, 657-247-5427, salstacosal-americana.com.

42 BANDITO TAQUERIA The crew behind Bandido is building a food truck. Until that's ready to roll, you can find their Tijuana-style tacos in a parking lot on Main Street and sometimes they pop up in bars like Vacation Bar in downtown Santa Ana. Just look for smoke billowing from a large, portable mesquite grill. The grilled meats are excellent. And the tortillas are pink.

2202 S. Main St., Santa Ana, 949-315-6505, instagram.com/banditotaqueria.

43 GLORIA'S MEXICAN FOOD Gloria's doesn't have indoor seating. There's barely enough room inside for more than one customer at a time. But they usually have a couple of tables on the sidewalk. If you show up on a Friday or Saturday night, you'll find a glorious trompo loaded with pork al pastor. On other nights and weekdays, the pork is cooked on a flattop grid-dle. Either way, it's delicious. The meat is thickly sliced and heavily charred, infused with a red-chile marinade that seeps into its core.

731 W. 19th St. Costa Mesa, 949-646-9420, gloriasmexican-food.com.

44 EL CABRITO The sign above the door says "cabrito" and the goat birria is unrivaled. But what this old taqueria with the sprawling patio does better than anyone else is chorizo. The sausage is finely crumbled and cooked well beyond the point where most other taqueiros would have stuffed it into a tortilla and been done with it. They let it sizzle and sputter in a pool of its own fat until it turns black and crispy. When you take a bite, the chorizo snaps and pops between your teeth, exploding with vibrant red chiles and cumin and charred pork fat. Perfection.

1604 W. First St., Santa Ana, 714-543-8461, instagram.com/elcabritorestaurant.

45 NAVARRO'S TAQUERIA The tortillas are made to order by hand at this shoebox-sized taqueria across the street from Madison Park. After a solid dunking into a vat of perfectly greasy beef birria consommé, the tortillas are stuffed with shredded meat from that same vat and set atop the grid-dle and left there until they start to puff and turn crisp around the edges. These are some of the best "red tacos" around. Insider



Tex-Mex barbecue brisket taco at Heritage Barbecue in San Juan Capistrano.

tip: Ask for the secret bright-orange salsa made with chiles de arbol, which isn't available on the salsa bar. It's a serious contender for hottest salsa in Santa Ana.

1535 S. Standard Ave., Santa Ana, 714-486-1068, instagram.com/navarros_taqueria.

46 LOS CHILANGOS Think of it as the ultimate Taco Grande. Technically it's a Mexico City-style quesadilla. It starts with a large, freshly pressed tortilla almost big enough for a burrito. While the tortilla cooks on the grid-dle, it gets topped with anything from squash blossoms to carne asada. Once it starts to crisp, it gets loaded with shredded lettuce and queso fresco and folded in half. Looks like a taco. Tastes like a taco. Way bigger.

1830 W. Lincoln Ave., Anaheim, 714-999-5515, instagram.com/loschilangosrestaurant.

47 CHIHUAHUA CERVEZA Craft beer company Chihuahua Cerveza opened this taqueria on the Balboa peninsula (next door to a Chipotle, funny enough) to showcase its Mexican-style lagers. The beer is high-caliber, but the tacos steal the show, especially the delightfully fatty carnitas, some of the best food of any brewery tasting room in OC.

3107 Newport Blvd., Newport Beach, 949-771-8226, chihuahucerveza.com.

48 PERLA If you have ever wondered how many tacos can be made from a whole 2-pound lobster, Perla has the answer: Three. They are gigantic. They are not cheap. And they are absolutely delightful. The spiny lobsters are grilled whole, then their tails are chopped and divided among three incredibly fluffy flour tortillas layered with fried cheese and garnished with roasted poblanos, purple cabbage, pico de gallo and spicy chipotle aioli.

400 W. Fourth St., Santa Ana, 714-316-5421, perladttsa.com.



Chorizo mulita at Sal's Tacos a la Mexicana in Santa Ana.

49 WILD TACO Here's a great combination: craft beer, serious tacos and a strong Ensenada vibe. Wild Taco serves excellent fish tacos, notably line-caught red snapper. All the tortillas, both corn and flour, are made fresh daily in-house. The carne asada comes from grass-fed beef and the carnitas drip with luscious pork fat.

407 31st St. Newport Beach, 949-673-9453; 188 S. Coast Hwy., Laguna Beach, 949-549-4282, thewildtaco.com.

50 EL YAQUI TACOS Y MARISCOS For more than a decade, Mariscos El Yaqui drove around Orange County selling Sonora-style fish tacos from a food truck. But now they have a brick and mortar restaurant in Santa Ana. The menu is strictly fish and seafood and the signature taco is called el perron. It's made with boiled shrimp, shredded cabbage and crema, plus wonderfully crunchy, salty marlin chicharrones. Note: The pastel-colored creamy habanero salsa looks harmless, but it is savage.

1935 E. 17th St., Santa Ana, 714-617-4880, elyaquitacosmariscos.com.



Tacos al pastor at Gloria's Mexican Food in Costa Mesa.



One spiny lobster becomes three tacos at Perla in Santa Ana.