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tucson  
**MEET OUR**  
*makers*

We're feeling extra spicy this month. Maybe it's the summer heat or the fact that we just annihilated one of Chef Mateo Otero's birria tacos smothered in salsita. In any case, keep reading to hear from Otero or click the link below to read the latest and greatest media updates from Tucson.

[What's New](#)



## Meet Chef Mateo Otero

The moment you pull into the parking lot of Rollie's Mexican Patio, you instantly feel at home.

It's located in Tucson's main artery of Mexican food – on 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue – where some of the country's best Borderlands dishes can be found.

The bold colors that plaster the walls out front – hues of bright pink and turquoise – are the perfect pairing to the establishment's effervescent owner and chef, Mateo Otero, a man whom you would never guess is a classically

trained chef and graduate of Le Cordon Bleu because of his approachability and down to earth demeanor.

The day I speak with the 42-year-old Otero, he is prepping food in the kitchen of his mainstay restaurant, a no-frills type of place, where you order a litany of best hits over the counter.

There's the much raved about birria, which Otero calls a "COVID favorite" since it's surged in popularity over the past few years. His is made with beef, not the traditional goat, and the tender and savory meat falls to pieces when smothered in the au jus sauce, a byproduct of the birria's 16-hour preparation process.

"It's like a mole; there's an art to birria and it's all in the preparation and the spice," said Otero.

Then, there are the open-faced enchiladas, featuring a nearly inch thick patty of deep-fried (and mouthwatering) masa that's topped with shredded cabbage, cotija and zesty green olives, and your choice of protein (or not).

And there are the restaurant's namesake rolled tacos which offer the option of potato, chicken or birria, in a fried rolled corn tortilla, and drizzled with an enchilada-like rojo or creamy queso sauce, depending on your preference.

"Growing up as a Chicano from Tucson, when your mom or grandma asked you what you wanted for lunch, you got a rolled taco," Otero said "I did take a risk doing it – after all, when people think of tacos, they think of street tacos. But that's not what we were eating in Tucson."



Though Otero's food seems simple, its intense flavor profile and ingenuity is not to be overlooked.

Otero has fully embraced Tucson's mixing pot mentality, with strong influences from Sonora and Jalisco Mexico, while also putting his personal mark on each of his dishes. The aforementioned green olives and cabbage delineate from the traditional preparation of open-faced enchiladas – which feature black olives and lettuce – in a subtle way that becomes a necessity once you've tried them.

His genius hails from years of experimenting in the kitchen, dating back to the age of 5, when he accompanied his grandfather, a chef, to work. He recalls being enthralled while watching him melt a mountain of butter for a dish he was preparing.

From then on, "I was burning the shit out of breakfast on Saturday mornings while all the other kids were watching cartoons in the other room," Otero said.



Otero has strong roots in the culinary world – both his grandfather and father worked in the kitchen – and in Tucson – he’s a 6<sup>th</sup> generation Tucsonan on his mother’s side and 3<sup>rd</sup> generation on his father’s side.

His earliest memories align with eating foods like his nana’s tacos, folded with ground beef, fried and then covered in peas and lettuce – an item on Rollie’s menu – and his father’s bacon-wrapped Sonoran dogs, now ubiquitous in Tucson, but a rarity in the ‘80s when Otero was growing up.

Otero was only 14 when he got his big break after he was selected by a career builder program to work at a restaurant in the Student Union of the University of Arizona. The lessons he learned there paved the way for him to take a job at El Minuto, a Tucson Mexican food institution, when he was only 17.

From there, his resume features a who’s who list of Mexican and fine dining restaurants in Tucson, until Otero landed a gig at a fine dining restaurant at a local casino, where he was “getting into too much trouble hanging with blackjack dealers.”

That’s when he applied and was accepted to Le Cordon Bleu in Scottsdale, a move that “saved my life,” he says.

The greatest gift he obtained while attending Le Cordon Bleu was learning not how to cook French fare (he’s the first to admit he’s not a fan), but to embrace his ingenuity for tweaking traditional recipes and discovering cultural mashups, like the much raved about birria ramen at Rollie’s.

“I worked at a sushi restaurant while I was attending school in Scottsdale,” Otero said. “I realized how much I loved Asian food and Mexican food, and how to bridge the two.”



Not long after finishing his schooling, Otero returned to Tucson, and started his own catering business while working a second job as a personal chef at a frat house. Many of the items found on Rollie's menu originated from the trial and error of Otero's catering business.

Then in 2017, at the request of his devotees, Otero made the leap into a brick and mortar, opening Rollie's Mexican Patio four weeks after getting the keys.

The original menu is plastered on the wall in his prep kitchen, and it's far more extensive than the current one, which Otero culled down during COVID because of supply chain delays and soaring food costs. He says the current menu, though less gourmand than its earlier iteration, is a curated list of fan

favorites.

“I really let my light shine,” Otero said. “And I’m grateful it’s been embraced by the community.”

In fall of 2022, Otero opened his second location at the MSA Annex on Tucson’s west side out of a food truck. The menu offers a few of the items found at the mainstay restaurant on 12<sup>th</sup>, plus some that are exclusive to the new locale. Among them are a birria bánh mì torta, potato cheesy tacos, strawberry horchata, and sweet cinnamon iced tea, all of which have been well received by his new clientele. The location will temporarily shut down during the hotter summer months, but will return in the cooler fall months, Otero said.

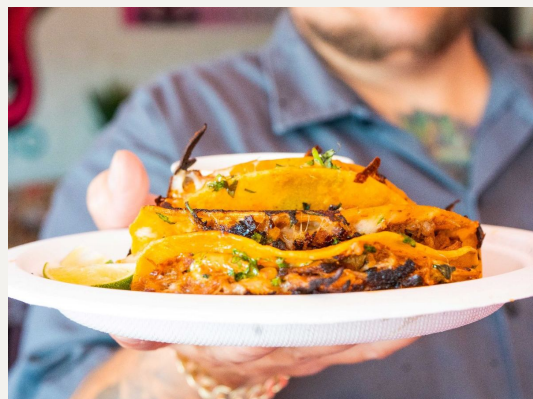
Until then, you can find Otero at his 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue location, or “rolling” on his new three-wheeler bike, soaking up time with his 5-year-old and 9-year-old children and his fiancé, he said.

“It was in my blood to be a chef and I am fortunate to call myself one,” Otero said. “But I still make my family my priority.”

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