

2009-2010 PRESENTING SPONSOR: SEATTLE TIMES LITERARYARTS SERIES SPONSOR: GLANT TEXTILES EVENT SPONSORS: SWEDISH MEDICAL CENTER, UNIVERSITY BOOK STORE MEDIA SPONSORS: SEATTLE MAGAZINE, KUJOW 94.9FM, KCTS 9, SEATTLE WEEKLY, CITY ARTS, KBCS 91.3FM

SEATTLE ARTS & LECTURES' SERIES PRESENTS 2.10.10 7:30PM \ BENAROYA HALL \ TAPER AUDITORIUM

DR. ABRAHAM VERGHESE FOR TICKETS & INFORMATION: LECTURES.ORG OR 206.621.2230

## Brain Tacos or Cheesy Migas?

Two high-volume taquerias have a lot to say about Houston tacos.

By Robb Walsh

published: January 28, 2010

The "Trump Taco" at **Chacho's Tacos** on Westheimer in the Galleria was overloaded with grilled sirloin, mushrooms and cheese. The spinach-and-mushroom quesadilla was so full of cheese, it was almost an inch thick. My dining companion couldn't finish half of it. The *borracho* beans on the chicken fajita plate were loaded with meat, and the home fries were made with hand-cut potatoes. The flour tortillas were huge and pocked with brown spots where the griddle had charred them. At Chacho's, all the thick, oversize flour tortillas are rolled out by hand with a rolling pin.

Some people talk about doing great things. Others just do them.

**BELLEVue COLLEGE**  
Become Exceptional

Sign up for classes now at [bellevuecollege.edu](http://bellevuecollege.edu).

Troy Fields



Chacho's "Trump Taco" is a meal in itself.

Where:

Chacho's Tacos

6006 Westheimer,  
713-975-9699.

De Buey y Vaca

8720 Airline Dr.,

Details:

Chacho's Tacos

Open 24 hours.

Trump taco: \$4

I have been driving by Chacho's for years now. It didn't look like my kind of restaurant. I love vintage Tex-Mex and I love barrio taquerias, and I have never been much for garishly painted fast-food outlets. But on a recent Saturday night, as we were driving home from a hectic day of errands and social obligations, we needed a quick fix for dinner.

"Look," my spouse said, pointing at Chacho's, "a double drive-through lane."

We were both amazed by the food when we got home. The Trump Taco cost four dollars, but it was a meal in itself. No, it wasn't stellar, old-fashioned Tex-Mex, nor was it great authentic Mexican cuisine. But it was the best fast-food version of San Antonio Tex-Mex I've ever had. And the prices weren't that much more than Taco Bell's.

Chacho's is a small, privately owned San Antonio-based chain with a fascinating marketing premise. Chacho's pays its employees well and has very little turnover. It uses higher-priced ingredients, but keeps the cost of the food low. In order to make a profit, the place has to do huge volume — which it does. If the quality of the tacos is surprising, the number of people eating there at any given time is astonishing.

That Saturday was a weird taco-obsessed day. I had my first taco before eleven in the morning. It was a Mexican-style taco stuffed with rubbery *tripitas* (tripe) at **De Buey y Vaca**, an enormous taqueria on North Airline. I was eating with Guns & Tacos blogger Jay Rascoe. I said I wished I could bring every *gabacho* who ever told me he preferred "authentic Mexican" food to Tex-Mex here for breakfast.

There is a strange disconnect between what mainstream diners call

Chorizo and egg  
taco: \$1.69

Machacado and egg  
taco: \$2.79

Migas: \$5

Half spinach  
quesadilla: \$3.79

De Buey y Vaca

9 a.m. to 9 p.m. -  
Saturdays and  
Sundays.

Subject(s):

[Chacho's Tacos](#), [De Buey y Vaca](#)

"authentic Mexican food" in little upscale restaurants and the food that Mexican nationals actually eat. If you travel in Mexico, you understand how arbitrary the average gringo's concept of authentic Mexican food is.

In that sense, De Buey y Vaca taqueria is like a trip across the border. I was amazed when Rascoe pointed out a pile of interior Mexican-style tacos *dorados*. These are tortillas folded around a stuffing, fastened with toothpicks, and deep-fried. Tacos dorados, or golden tacos, are fairly rare in Texas, so when I saw three varieties, I got one of each.

The one filled with mashed sweet potato was bland; the one filled with refried beans was pretty good. But the best by far was the deep-fried taco stuffed with *sesos*. The spicy seasonings and chopped offal were so well blended, you didn't even notice you were eating brains.

I included a recipe for old-fashioned "toothpick tacos" in my *Tex-Mex Cookbook* because of their place in culinary history. Taco Bell founder Glen Bell was inspired to start his own taco restaurant after eating the "toothpick tacos" at a popular Santa Monica taco stand. His preformed taco shells were an attempt at streamlining the labor-intensive taco-making process.

A few days later, I read that that Saturday, January 16, the very day I had devoted to thinking about tacos, was the day that Glen Bell died.

Just a coincidence?

---

De Buey y Vaca is located in the famous Airline Drive Flea Markets, north Houston's version of a Mexican *mercado*. Some 50,000 visitors pass through these enormous markets every weekend, according to the Airline neighborhood association. And while I wasn't particularly interested in the stalls selling cowboy boots, jewelry, tires or home electronics, I was blown away by the dozens of food stalls.

The best thing I had at De Buey y Vaca was the *barbacoa* soup, a steaming bowl of the chile-seasoned broth that the cow's head was cooked in with carrots, potatoes, vegetables and some big hunks of the cheek meat from the *barbacoa*. You eat it with onions and cilantro, a squeeze of lime and a stack of tortillas. It's a weekend breakfast in the same family as menudo or pozole.

The next day, we went back to Chacho's for an early Sunday-morning breakfast. Chacho's is open 24 hours, and the crowd can be pretty colorful. In fact, I've heard that at three or four in the morning, it's the best place in town to meet exotic dancers getting off work from the numerous gentlemen's clubs in the Galleria area.

We got there before eight, and sure enough, the place was packed with kids who looked like they had been up all night. They were wearing pajamas under their clothes and those wacky hats that people wear to all-night clubs.

The breakfasts at Chacho's came with the same excellent flour tortillas and hand-cut hash browns. The refried beans were flavored with bacon grease, and all the breakfasts came on heated, oversize china plates. A *machacado* taco was stuffed with a huge serving of scrambled eggs and dried beef; a chorizo-and-egg taco was similarly generous. Both were a little on the underseasoned side, but I remedied that with some jalapeños from the salsa bar.

There were four kinds of salsas — a red, a green, a mango salsa and a pico de gallo. None of the salsas

was particularly picante. There were also fresh and pickled jalapeños and chopped onions with cilantro available at the condiment island. The coffee was so-so, but the orange juice was freshly squeezed.

I made the mistake of asking for cheese with an order of *migas*. The blanket of cheese on top of the scrambled eggs smothered the flavor of everything else. Likewise, an inventive plate of "breakfast enchiladas" — two Chacho's flour tortillas wrapped around some migas and topped with a light coating of enchilada sauce and heavy coating of cheese — would have been better with less queso.

"You might like the migas without the cheese now," my wife observed. "But it's exactly the sort of cheesy breakfast you want to eat when you're drunk — or stoned."

"Or both," I had to agree.

My wife likes the mainstream version of authentic Mexican food, but would never order a tripe taco, a brain taco or a bowl of cow-head soup. She won't eat at Taco Bell either. But she loved the Tex-Mex at Chacho's. And though I never would have guessed it driving by the place, so did I.

So which would I recommend, Chacho's Tacos or De Buey y Vaca? The answer, of course, is both. These are two of the largest-volume taco stands in the city of Houston, and each has its own appeal. For a trip to Mexico without leaving Houston, De Buey y Vaca is an amazing place. But if you like your San Antonio-style Tex-Mex with handmade tortillas and two drive-through lanes in a Galleria location, you gotta love the 24-hour mayhem that is Chacho's Tacos on Westheimer.

On our way out the door, I asked one of the bleary-eyed kids if he had been up all night at a wild party. I thought he was going to spill the beans about a drug-induced orgy.

"I've been up for two nights," he said, giggling.

"Yeah? What kind of party was it," I said, egging him on.

"It was a youth group lock-in at the Unitarian Church," he replied. My eyes widened in horror.

What's the matter with these kids today?