



# ZAGAT 2013

Turn Up the Heat:  
America's Hottest  
Mexican Restaurants



# What's Next in Mex:

## 5 New Trends in Mexican Cooking

by Kathleen Squires

While chefs like Enrique Olvera (Pujol, Mexico City) have been revolutionizing Mexico's dining scene within the last decade, it has taken some time for "progressive Mex" to cross the border into the U.S. Inspired by rare ingredients and new techniques, some American chefs are now offering exciting Mexican menus that go beyond the typical red-salsa-green-salsa fare.

### Not Your Abuela's Guacamole

Guacamole just got groundbreaking, thanks to chefs adding unusual ingredients to the avocado mix. Alex Stupak's non-traditional guacs at NYC's Empellón Cocina include pistachio, pork jowl and sea urchin, for example. At Tamayo in Denver, Richard Sandoval adds tuna tartare with sesame and wonton to his variety. And Eric Williams of Cleveland's Momocho likes it extra creamy, adding blue cheese and goat cheese to his dairy-dosed dips.



## Out With Tequila - In With the Mezcal

Sure, they are close relatives, but there seems to be a sibling rivalry underway between tequila and mezcal. While tequila was once top tippie at any Mexican-themed bar, the rise in new mezcalerias is proving the agave-based spirit's popularity. Cases in point: Austin's Bar Illegal, which serves only mezcal.

## The State of Salsa: In a Pickle

The bracing sharpness of pickled vegetables mimic the impact of salsa, so it's an obvious sub-in to Mexican menus all over the country. Chicago's new Takito is using pickled chiles to pump up its polenta, and pickled jalapeños liven up the duck huaraches at Jose Garces' Distrito in Philadelphia. And pickled cabbage? A perfectly perky companion to Alex Stupak's heralded short rib pastrami taco at Empellón Taqueria in NYC.

## Mexing-and-Matching Cuisines

Some chefs can't resist a little cultural blending. Mike Isabella, of DC's newly opened taqueria Bandolero, pays homage to the American South by reinventing chicken and waffles into chicken and churros. At Philadelphia's Paloma, chef Adan Saavedra is known for using French technique, but a shrimp vol-au-vent, featuring the crustaceans and huitlacoche in habanero-chardonnay sauce in a puff pastry nest, drives home the Gallic twist to his haute Mexican menu. And Jose Andrés justifies his Mexico-meets-Asia menu at Las Vegas' China Poblano with creations such as huitlacoche noodles, a dish you'd be hard-pressed to find in China or Mexico (or anywhere else, for that matter).

## Today's Special: Insects

Finally, diners in the U.S. are getting less squeamish about authentic south-of-the-border ingredients such as chapulines (grasshoppers) and guisanos (maguey worms). At Poquitos in Seattle, you can order chapulines toasted in chile-lime salt, while New York City's Toloache tucks the crunchy critters into tacos (a traditional snack). At Rocio's Moles del Dioses in Los Angeles, maguey worms add texture to a mezcal salsa. "Mexican caviar," aka the ant eggs known as escamoles, however, are a delicacy that is still hard to come by in the U.S.



# Q&A With a Mexican Food Master



**Rick Bayless** is one of the most authoritative voices on Mexican cooking. From a six-year stint living in Mexico, to his acclaimed PBS show, *Mexico: One Plate at a Time*, to Frontera Grill and Topolobampo, his highly rated restaurants in Chicago that have been going strong for nearly three decades, to winning the first season of *Top Chef Masters* with his specialized cuisine, the chef's passion for south-of-the-border fare comes across loud and clear.

## How did you get interested in Mexican cuisine?

When I was 14 years old my family and I took a trip to Mexico City. My mother was so afraid that we weren't going to find a cab when we landed at 9 PM. (In Oklahoma City the sidewalks roll up about then.) We landed and the airport was packed! We got to our hotel on the Zócalo, and I was already in love before my first bite. Mariachis, street vendors, dancers – it was really magical.



**How much time do you spend in Mexico now?** I travel there frequently – for the TV show, cooking and teaching classes and for our Fourth of July staff trip. I use it as a means of gearing up again – it always fills me with ideas and inspires me.

**Which chefs or restaurants do you admire in Mexico?** I am a huge fan of Jorge Vallejo of Mexico City and his restaurant Quintonil.

**How does your Mexican cooking differ from the authentic form? How is it traditional?** I always say I am lucky because I don't have a Mexican grandmother. I don't have to be loyal to any recipe and that gives me freedom. Our food is traditional flavors of Mexico, but I do think we give it our twist – whether it be in the plating, the use of our local agriculture or something as simple as a different garnish.

**What's your favorite Mexican ingredient of the moment?** I really love working with different herbs. I think it can add an element of surprise to a dish or a cocktail. I try anything out seasonally – it makes anything more exciting and I love that it might have a local story.

**Where do you find inspiration for your Mexican cooking?** Travel, my staff, seasonal ingredients – I am lucky I have a job I love!

**Are there any Mexican cooking trends people should be watching for?** I think the idea of ordering a lot of bites and tastes is cool and fun. We have even written our menu for easy ordering and sharing. Categories like “From the Fire” or “Old School Frontera Favorites” have been hits.





# ¡Ay, Caramba!

Whether you're jonesing for a burrito bursting with beef or citrus-tinged ceviche (or both!), this special-edition guide will lead you to top-rated Mexican restaurants in Austin, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York City, Philadelphia, San Francisco and Washington, DC.

For more recommendations and for our Mexican Food Week survey results, check out [blog.zagat.com](http://blog.zagat.com).

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The reviews in this guide are based on public opinion surveys. The ratings reflect the average scores given by the survey participants who voted on each establishment. The text is based on quotes from, or paraphrasings of, the surveyors' comments. Phone numbers, addresses and other factual data were correct to the best of our knowledge when published in this guide.

## Key to Ratings & Symbols

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Food, Decor & Service are rated on a 30-point scale:

**26** – **30** Extraordinary to Perfection

**21** – **25** Very Good to Excellent

**16** – **20** Good to Very Good

**11** – **15** Fair to Good

**0** – **10** Poor to Fair

▽ low response | less reliable

Reviews are compiled from user comments, with representative comments shown in quotation marks.

Cost estimates are for the price of dinner with a drink and tip.

For places without ratings, the price range is as follows:

**I** \$25 and below

**M** \$26 to \$40

**E** \$41 to \$65

**VE** \$66 or above

● serves after 11 PM

☒ closed on Sunday

☒ closed on Monday

☒ no credit cards accepted



# Austin

## Azul Tequila

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
24	14	22	\$21

South Lamar | 4211 S. Lamar Blvd. (Ben White Blvd.) | 512-416-9667

[www.azultequila.com](http://www.azultequila.com)

“Authentic”, Aztec-inspired cooking and “potent margaritas” (with a selection of 60 tequilas) are the pull at this South Lamar eatery that’s a nice changeup from the “typical Tex-Mex”; low prices are a plus, but the “nondescript” strip-mall setup is “the antithesis of a see-and-be-seen setting.”

## Fonda San Miguel

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
25	27	23	\$42

Highland Park | 2330 North Loop Blvd. W. (Hancock Dr.) | 512-459-4121

[www.fondasanmiguel.com](http://www.fondasanmiguel.com)

“Colorful and full of beautiful pottery”, this Highland Park hacienda has long been “a treat for the eyes as well as the taste buds” with “impeccable” interior Mexican fare in a “casually elegant” setting tended by a “knowledgeable” crew; especially “memorable” is Sunday’s bountiful buffet brunch – a long-standing “tradition” and quite the “event”; “don’t eat all weekend” before you go.



## Sazón

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
24	12	18	\$33

Zilker | 1816 S. Lamar Blvd. (Hether St.) | 512-326-4395

[www.sazonaustin.com](http://www.sazonaustin.com)

“Inexpensive interior Mexican food in a hole-in-the-wall” setting sums up this Zilker spot lauded for its “outstanding” fish dishes and a “huitlacoche omelet at breakfast that’s worth making the trip for”; decor may be “sparse to the point of looking unfinished”, but the service is “friendly” and the covered patio is pleasant for weekend brunches and happy-hour margaritas.

## Tacodeli

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
26	12	20	\$11

Northwest Austin | 12001 N. Burnet Rd. (Mopac Expwy.) | 512-339-1700

Rosedale | 4200 N. Lamar Blvd. (42nd St.) | 512-419-1900

Southwest Austin | 1500 Spyglass Dr. (Mopac Expwy.) | 512-732-0303

[www.tacodeli.com](http://www.tacodeli.com)

“Excellence wrapped in a tortilla” is how devotees describe the “delicious”, “gourmet” Mexican street eats crafted from “fresh, local and organic ingredients” at this counter-service trio that’s once again ranked Austin’s No. 1 for Bang for the Buck; open for breakfast and lunch only, it’s always busy, but “friendly folks” keep the constant lines moving fast, and you can also call ahead to skip the wait; P.S. “the salsa doña is a true revelation.”



## Torchy's Tacos

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
24	14	19	\$11

Bouldin Creek | South Austin Trailer Park & Eatery | 1311 S. First St.  
(bet. Elizabeth & Gibson Sts.) | 512-366-0537

Bouldin Creek | 2809 S. First St. (El Paso St.) | 512-444-0300

Brentwood | 5119 Burnet Rd. (North St.) | 512-382-0823

Campus | 2801 Guadalupe St. (bet. 28th & 29th Sts.) | 512-494-8226

Circle C | 4301 W. William Cannon Dr. (Brush Country Rd.) | 512-514-0767

Northwest Hills | 4211 Spicewood Springs Rd. (Mesa Dr.) | 512-291-7277

South Lamar | 3005 S. Lamar Blvd. (Manchaca Rd.) | 512-614-1832

[www.torchystacos.com](http://www.torchystacos.com)

“Stop reading and go now!” exclaim fans of this ever-growing Mexican chain cherished for its “creative” tacos “bursting with delicious fillings” like fried avocado and “spicy” jerk chicken; “you can eat pretty well pretty cheap”, so most don’t mind the minimal service and settings or “lines out the door”; breakfast is popular too; P.S. the original is a trailer on 1311 South First Street in Austin.



# Boston

## Angela's Café

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
25	14	22	\$25

East Boston | 131 Lexington St. (Brooks St.) | 617-567-4972

[www.angelascafeboston.com](http://www.angelascafeboston.com)

“Mama can cook” assure devotees of this “family-run” spot in East Boston that’s “a bit off the beaten track, but worth the effort” for “amazing, authentic Mexican” breakfasts, lunches and dinners with “a few twists”; a “welcoming” staff and prices that “won’t put too big a dent in your wallet” are further advantages, making it easy to overlook the “small”, “no-frills environment.”

## El Sarape

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
26	17	22	\$28

Braintree | 5 Commercial St. (Taber Ct.) | 781-843-8005

[www.elsarape.com](http://www.elsarape.com)

“Don’t dismiss” this Braintree spot because of its “cheesy”, “cramped” quarters – if you do, you’ll miss out on “outstanding” Mexican meals offered at “affordable” rates; during the week, it’s a place to “chillax” with the aid of “strong margaritas”, while on weekends, the atmosphere is more “fun”, thanks in part to the “loud” live music.



## Taqueria Mexico

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
24	11	20	\$18

Waltham | 24 Charles St. (bet. Mechanic & Water Sts.) | 781-647-0166


[www.taqueriamexico.com](http://www.taqueriamexico.com)

“Almost no money” gets you “large helpings” of “incredible” Mexican comida at this “somewhat drab”, “little hole-in-the-wall” in Waltham; there’s a “wide variety of choices” on the menu, which the “friendly” staff can help you navigate before bringing your selections out “quick.”

## Tu y Yo

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
24	16	22	\$30

Somerville | 858 B'way (College Ave.) | 617-623-5411

Needham | 66 Chestnut St. (Chestnut Rd.) | 781-453-1000 

“Remarkable” recipes “handed down for generations” and “prepared con amor” are the selling points of this “affordable” Somerville cantina and its Needham offshoot, both “great places to go for dishes you can’t find at any ol’ Mexican restaurant” (“try the grasshopper”); adorned with a “spartan” amount of decor meant to evoke 18th-century Mexico, the venue boasts “the feel of a family-owned restaurant where the family cares about the food and their guests.”



## Zócalo Cocina Mexicana

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
24	19	22	\$26

Back Bay | 35 Stanhope St. (bet. Berkeley & Claredon Sts.) | 617-456-7849

Arlington | 203A Broadway (Rawson Rd.) | 781-643-2299 

[www.zocaloarlington.com](http://www.zocaloarlington.com)

“Creative and original platos de Mexico”, particularly the “fantastic guacamole made tableside”, “sing with flavor” at these Arlington and Back Bay casas of “high-end” (yet moderately priced) regional cuisine; the margaritas are just as “different and delicious” as the dishes, and they help to keep the atmosphere “chill”, as do the “helpful” servers.



# Chicago

**Big Star** 

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
<b>26</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>\$19</b>

Wicker Park | 1531 N. Damen Ave. (Wicker Park Ave.) | 773-235-4039

[www.bigstarchicago.com](http://www.bigstarchicago.com)

“Life-changing” “gourmet tacos and other Mexican street foods”, plus “brilliant beers”, “strong, fresh margaritas” and an “expansive collection of whiskey”, fuel an “über-cool” “hipster” scene (lots of “plaid shirts”) at this Wicker Park “hit” by Paul Kahan (Avec, Blackbird); it’s “cash-only” but pretty “cheap”, and though the “jam-packed” crowd means “insane” waits, most are willing to “fight for a table” on “one of the most happening patios in the city”; P.S. there’s an “outside take-out window” too.



## Frontera Grill

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
<b>27</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>\$44</b>

River North | 445 N. Clark St. (bet. Hubbard & Illinois Sts.) | 312-661-1434

[www.fronterakitchens.com](http://www.fronterakitchens.com)

“Celeb” chef-owner Rick Bayless’ “deep passion” shows at his “legendary” River North flagship that “elevates Mexican cuisine to a higher order”, offering “perfectly executed”, “imaginative” dishes with the “right balance of flavor and spice” plus “heavenly margaritas”, all set down by “consistently efficient”, “well-informed” servers in “festive”, “artwork-themed” digs; limited reservations mean it’s “very difficult to get a table” and waits are “extremely long”, but believers call it “the gold standard” for the genre (adjacent “Topolobampo is the platinum standard”), so “if it isn’t worth the wait, what is?”

## Mixteco Grill

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
<b>27</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>\$32</b>

Lakeview | 1601 W. Montrose Ave. (Ashland Ave.) | 773-868-1601

[www.mixtecogrill.com](http://www.mixtecogrill.com)

“Uniformly superb” apps, “to-die-for” mole sauces and “out-of-this-world” entrees make this Lakeview Mexican a “standout”, especially since BYO further tempers the “reasonably priced” tabs; service is “friendly” and the art “eye-catching”, so the “only negative is that it can get quite noisy.”



## Topolobampo

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
<b>28</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>\$70</b>

River North | 445 N. Clark St. (Illinois St.) | 312-661-1434

[www.rickbayless.com](http://www.rickbayless.com)

Celeb chef Rick Bayless “wrote the book on fine Mexican cuisine” (literally and figuratively) and he “keeps rewriting it” by “setting new standards” at his “upscale” River North “institution” where “inventive”, “refined interpretations” result in “sublime”, “mind-melting” moles and other “subtle” yet “complex” dishes served alongside “delicious” margaritas; “kind”, “informative” servers are “as comforting as family” in the “elegant”, art-enhanced dining room, so “if you win the fight to land a reservation, you will be a very happy camper”; P.S. for a “cheaper” experience try the adjoining Frontera Grill.

## Xoco

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
<b>26</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>\$19</b>

River North | 449 N. Clark St. (Illinois St.) | 312-334-3688

[www.rickbayless.com](http://www.rickbayless.com)

Fans go “loco for Xoco” at this “freaking amazing” River North counter-serve delivering “master” chef Rick Bayless’ “take on Mexican street food”, like “rich”, “inventive” tortas, “delicious” caldos and “well-seasoned guac”, topped off by “don’t-miss” churros and “thick, creamy” hot chocolate, all at a “fraction of the price” of his other places; the ordering process may be “bewildering”, the “small” space “crowded” and the lines “nightclub-style” long, so either “go off-times or just suck it up and think about all the great flavors that await you.”



# Los Angeles

## Alfredo's

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
27	20	26	\$20

Lomita | 2372 PCH (Pennsylvania Ave.) | 310-784-0393

[www.alfredosrestaurant.com](http://www.alfredosrestaurant.com)

This Lomita Mexican “satisfies cravings” with a broad menu of “perfectly cooked” traditional dishes plus some less common Yucatán-influence specialties; the “atmosphere is a little cold”, but prices are “fair” so most insist “you have to try it.”

## Babita Mexicuisine

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
27	15	25	\$44

San Gabriel | 1823 S. San Gabriel Blvd. (Norwood Pl.) | 626-288-7265

[www.babita-mexicuisine.com](http://www.babita-mexicuisine.com)

Hidden behind a “plain” San Gabriel facade, this “unexpected” “culinary treasure” leaves adventurous eaters “blown away” by the “creative” “gourmet Mexican” cuisine “lovingly crafted” by chef-owner Roberto Berrelleza, who “relishes educating diners about the unusual menu”; it’s a “high-end” excursion that may spark “sticker shock”, but most maintain it’s “worth the trip.”



## El Tepeyac

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
26	14	22	\$15

East LA | 812 N. Evergreen Ave. (bet. Blanchard & Winter Sts.) |  
323-267-8668

[www.manuelseftepeyac.com](http://www.manuelseftepeyac.com)

Since 1955, owner Manuel Rojas has been welcoming customers “with a big smile” and often a “shot of tequila” at his “homey”, “heartwarming” East LA Mexican “landmark” where diners endure “long lines” for “delicious”, “gargantuan” Hollenbeck burritos (a “true eating challenge”), “top” guacamole and other “real home-cooked” dishes that make it one of the city’s “best buys”; while some may be “put off by the location”, fans insist “it has never been a problem.”

## Mucho Ultima Mexicana

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
26	24	24	\$36

Manhattan Beach | 903 Manhattan Ave. (9th St.) | 310-374-4422



[www.muchomb.com](http://www.muchomb.com)

A “young, hip” crowd digs the “modern Mexican” cuisine and potent margaritas made from an “extensive” array of tequilas at this “high-end” cantina in Manhattan Beach; the “beautiful” “dimly” lit orange-and-red room may be “perfect for a date”, although many favor it for the “happening bar scene” that runs late into the night.



## Yuca's

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
25	9	22	\$11

Los Feliz | 2056 Hillhurst Ave. (bet. Ambrose Ave. & Price St.) |  
323-662-1214  

Los Feliz | 4666 Hollywood Blvd. (bet. Rodney Dr. & Vermont Ave.) |  
323-661-0523

[www.yucasla.com](http://www.yucasla.com)

“Tiny but amazing”, this taco-shack duo in Los Feliz is famed for its “melt-in-your-mouth” cochinita pibil and “outrageous” carnitas as well as some of “the best cheapo burritos in town”; it’s primarily takeout at both locales, but fans still call it “a must-visit” for anyone seeking a “real LA” experience.



# New York City

## El Paso Mexican Restaurant

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
24	17	20	\$29

E 100s | 1643 Lexington Ave. (bet. 103rd & 104th Sts.) | 212-831-9831

E 90s | 64 E. 97th St. (bet. Madison & Park Aves.) | 212-996-1739

Harlem | 237 E. 116th St. (bet. 2nd & 3rd Aves.) | 212-860-4875

[elpasony.com](http://elpasony.com)

Mole mavens hail the “must-have” tacos, “fresh guacamole” and “friendly” service at these “muy bueno” Uptown Mexicans; devotees tout “lots of flavor” at little cost.

## Empellón Cocina

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
23	19	19	\$53

E Village | 105 First Ave. (bet. 6th & 7th Sts.) | 212-780-0999

## Empellón Taqueria 🌙

W Village | 230 W. Fourth St. (W. 10th St.) | 212-367-0999

[www.empellon.com](http://www.empellon.com)

Chef Alex Stupak’s “bold” detour from desserts at WD-50 to “high-minded” Mexicana pays off at this “trendy” twosome; the original West Village outlet “redefines the taco”, while the “more upscale” East Village spin-off aces “super-imaginative” small plates; between the “killer” drinks and “fashionable” following, both enjoy crazy “buzz.”



## Mercadito

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
24	17	18	\$33

E Village | 179 Ave. B (bet. 11th & 12th Sts.) | 212-529-6490

## Mercadito Grove Mexican

W Village | 100 Seventh Ave. S. (bet. Bleecker & Grove Sts.) | 212-647-0830

[www.mercaditorestaurants.com](http://www.mercaditorestaurants.com)

To “quench taco cravings”, hit these crosstown Mexican “favorites” where the “fair-priced”, “authentic tastes” are best washed down with a “terrific margarita” or two; both the service and the “tight” quarters are “undistinguished”, but in “warm weather” the West Villager’s patio is the “spot to be.”

## Pampano Botaneria

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
24	21	21	\$54

E 40s | 209 E. 49th St. (bet. 2nd & 3rd Aves.) | 212-751-4545

## Pampano Taqueria

E 40s | Crystal Pavilion | 805 Third Ave. (bet. 49th & 50th Sts.) | 212-751-5257

[www.modernmexican.com](http://www.modernmexican.com)

Mexican “hits the high notes” at this “top-drawer” seafooder from chef Richard Sandoval and tenor Placido Domingo, where “unobtrusive” servers tend the “upstairs dining room” and “lovely” “rooftop” terrace; the new ground-floor Botaneria earns “kudos” for its “interesting tapas”, while Taqueria around the corner continues to do “gangbuster business.”



## Toloache

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
24	18	21	\$47

E 80s | 166 E. 82nd St. (bet. Lexington & 3rd Aves.) | 212-861-4505

W 50s | 251 W. 50th St. (bet. B'way & 8th Ave.) | 212-581-1818

## Toloache Taqueria Mexican

Financial District | 83 Maiden Ln. (bet. Gold & William Sts.) | 212-809-9800

[www.toloachenyc.com](http://www.toloachenyc.com)

“Modern Mexican with a nod to the traditional” sums up the “upscale” comida at this “festive” Theater District cantina that’s also known for its “wonderful drinks”; the 82nd Street offshoot is “just what the UES needed”, while the FiDi’s Taqueria is a good quick-lunch pick.



# Philadelphia

## Distrito

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
25	25	23	\$43

University City | 3945 Chestnut St. (40th St.) | 215-222-1657

[www.districtorestarant.com](http://www.districtorestarant.com)

At his “hip”, “upbeat” University City cantina, Jose Garces’ “inventive riffs” on “snack-y haute” Mexican cuisine yield “tapas-size” entrees “perfect for sharing” but “so delicious you want to keep them to yourself”; “knowledgeable” servers provide “spot-on recommendations”, while “Pepto-Bismol pink walls”, “lucha libre masks”, a four-top set up in a VW bug and a karaoke room add to the “circuslike” “party vibe” that’s fueled by “festive margaritas.”

## El Camino Real

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
25	23	23	\$20

Northern Liberties | 1040 N. Second St. (bet. Girard Ave. & Poplar St.) | 215-925-1110

[www.elcaminophilly.com](http://www.elcaminophilly.com)

A “delicious mix” of Mexican and Texas BBQ grub backed by “dangerous” margaritas at this “bustling” Northern Liberties cantina “makes you feel like you’re in the Southwest”; the “lively” atmosphere feeds off “hipster energy”, “fast, efficient” service and bartenders “generous” with their pours, while low prices also help maintain “strong crowds”, but diehards “especially appreciate” the “late hours.”



## Lolita

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
<b>26</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>\$39</b>

Washington Square West | 106 S. 13th St. (bet. Chestnut & Sansom Sts.) |  
215-546-7100

[www.lolitabyob.com](http://www.lolitabyob.com)

“Bring your own tequila”, order housemade mixers and watch “the fun begin” at this “scene-driven”, cash-only Mex BYO in Wash West proffering “well-prepared” carne asada and other delights, served by an “efficient”, though some say “unfriendly”, staff; it gets “packed” and “loud” in the “tight space”, but for fans, that “just makes the party better”; P.S. there’s an \$18-per-person food minimum and automatic 20% tip on parties of five or more.

## Paloma Mexican Haute Cuisine

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
<b>28</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>\$54</b>

Bella Vista | 763 S. Eighth St. (Catharine St.) | 215-928-9500

[www.palomafinedining.com](http://www.palomafinedining.com)

Fans predict “you’ll keep coming back” to this “cozy”, white-tablecloth Bella Vista BYO for chef-owner Adán Saavedra’s “inventive” “haute” French fare “laced” with the “flavors and spices of Mexico” and topped off with his “charming” wife Barbara’s “homemade desserts” (the “spicy sorbets alone are worth the visit” to some); “charming” service, “reasonable” prices and a “quiet” setting with “ample room” “between tables” seal the deal.



## Tequilas

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
<b>26</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>\$41</b>

Rittenhouse | 1602 Locust St. (16th St.) | 215-546-0181

[www.tequilasphilly.com](http://www.tequilasphilly.com)

A Rittenhouse “institution”, this “upscale” Mexican from David Suro (who also owns the Siembra Azul distillery) turns out “fresh, clever” cuisine and “out-of-this-world” margaritas prepared by some of the “most knowledgeable tequila bartenders north of the border”; “beautiful”, “hacienda”-style surroundings and “entertaining” servers amp up the “lively atmosphere” (“go with a crowd”), but it’s an equally worthy choice for a “serious meal.”



# San Francisco

## Don Pisto's

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
25	20	20	\$28


North Beach | 510 Union St. (Grant Ave.) | 415-395-0939

[www.donpistos.com](http://www.donpistos.com)



It may be “surprising” that “some of the best Mexican food in the city” is “in North Beach”, but those who have “stumbled upon” this “hidden gem” are “thoroughly impressed” by the “explosive flavors”; “get there early” and “expect a wait” in the “exposed-brick” interior, but once you’re seated with the “loud” “hipster crowd” quaffing “addictive” margaritas, “service doesn’t skip a beat.”

## El Castillito

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
25	9	18	\$9

Castro | 136 Church St. (bet. Duboce Ave. & 14th St.) | 415-621-3428 

Civic Center | 370 Golden Gate Plaza (Larkin St.) | 415-292-7233

Mission | 2092 Mission St. (17th St.) | 415-621-6971  

“Lots of flavor” gets packed into the “to-die-for” burritos and carnitas at this Mexican trio; yes, the digs are a bit “grungy”, but service is “fast”, the bill is “small” and they “aren’t shy with the portions” – plus you can always “get your order to go.”



## La Taqueria

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
<b>25</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>\$12</b>

Mission | 2889 Mission St. (bet. 24th & 25th Sts.) | 415-285-7117

For 30 years, this “true original” in the Mission has been churning out affordable, “consistently delicious” Mexican meals comprising “awesome tacos” and “amazing” burritos that disciples call “massive missiles of yummy goodness” (they’re “traditional”, so “they don’t have rice”); “seating is scarce” in the “no-frills”, “divey” environs, so prepare for “constant lines” – though “speedy service” keeps them moving.

## Loló

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
<b>25</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>\$33</b>

Mission | 3230 22nd St. (bet. Mission & Valencia Sts.) | 415-643-5656

[www.lolosf.com](http://www.lolosf.com)

Tiny and “very eclectic”, this “neighborhood jewel” turns out “somewhat random but delicious” Med-Mex fusion “small plates” that are “just as spectacular” as the “funky decor” with its “colorful” walls and collection of “cute knickknacks”; “as with everything in the Mission, it’s gotten a bit too popular” but the “friendly” staff and “great value” offerings are “so worth it”; P.S. open until midnight Friday and Saturday.



## Taqueria San Jose

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
24	14	18	\$12

Mission | 2830 Mission St. (24th St.) | 415-282-0203

[www.taqueriasanjose1since1980.com](http://www.taqueriasanjose1since1980.com)

## Taqueria San Jose No. 3

North Beach | 2257 Mason St. (Francisco St.) | 415-749-0826

High demand for the “great-value burritos” and “carnitas tacos” can create “nightmare lines” at this bare-bones Mission Mexican stalwart (with newer offshoots in North Beach and San Jose); decor and service are not its strong points, so repeat customers advise figuring out your order “before you reach the counter.”



# Washington, DC

## Azucar

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
24	21	22	\$28

Silver Spring | Layhill Shopping Ctr. | 14418 Layhill Road (Bel Pre Rd.), MD |  
301-438-3293

[www.azucarrestaurantmd.com](http://www.azucarrestaurantmd.com)

“Superb” Mexican and Pan-Latin fare – from the complimentary salsa and “deliciously thin” chips, “right down to dessert and drinks” (e.g. “perfect” fresh-fruit daiquiris) – makes this “festively” colored, “candlelit” Silver Spring venue a neighborhood “standout”; add “diligent, unobtrusive” servers to the equation, and it’s an all-around “good value.”

## Bandolero

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
-	-	-	M

Georgetown | 3241 M St. NW (bet. Potomac St. & Wisconsin Ave.) |  
Washington | 202-625-4488

[www.bandolerodc.com](http://www.bandolerodc.com)

Mike Isabella (Graffiato) goes modern Mexican at this trendy Georgetown spot serving a midpriced menu of small plates and fancified versions of traditional comida, all washed down with crafty cocktails and margaritas; just don’t bring abuela to the loud, rollicking Mexican-Gothic space guarded by reclaimed cemetery gates and decorated with mismatched furniture and Day of the Dead–inspired animal skulls.



## Cacique

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
24	20	23	\$28

Frederick | 26 N. Market St. (Patrick St.), MD | 301-695-2756

[www.caciquefrederick.com](http://www.caciquefrederick.com)

The “muy bueno” “mix of Spanish and Mexican” dishes are “full of flavor” and “reasonably priced”, while the “excellent” margaritas and sangrias pack a punch at this “friendly” posada “in the heart of Frederick”; there may be more seating in the white-tablecloth interior, but the prime perches are in the “cramped” sidewalk area, “one of the best places to people-watch on Market Street.”

## Oyamel

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
25	22	21	\$42

Penn Quarter | 401 Seventh St. NW (D St.) | Washington | 202-628-1005

[www.oyamel.com](http://www.oyamel.com)

“No burritos or chimichangas here!” cheer fans of the “delightful, creative” tapas and street food given “a typical José Andrés twist” (e.g. grasshopper tacos “you’ll jump for”) at this high-end Penn Quarter Mexican with a “funky”, “loud” atmosphere; some say that service, while “friendly”, “doesn’t match the quality of the food”, but for most, niceties like “super-strong” margaritas and the “edible entertainment” of guacamole made tableside extend the fiesta feeling.



## Rosa Mexicano

FOOD	DECOR	SERVICE	COST
23	23	21	\$39

Chevy Chase | 5225 Wisconsin Avenue Northwest  
(bet. Ingomar & Jenifer Sts.) | Washington | 202-777-9959

Penn Quarter | 575 Seventh St. NW (bet. E & F Sts.) | Washington |  
202-783-5522

National Harbor | 153 Waterfront Street, MD | 301-567-1005

[www.rosamexicano.com](http://www.rosamexicano.com)

“Traditional dishes with a modern twist” are the hallmark of this “upscale Mexican” chain, though the menu received a recent revamp by chef-lebrity Jonathan Waxman, shifting to a local, market-driven focus and adding new dishes, including ceviche, possibly outdating the Food rating (don’t worry – the favorites will remain, like its “killer” tableside guacamole and “outstanding” pomegranate margaritas); “fast” service keeps things rosy in the colorful, contemporary settings, so even if some feel the midpriced fare is “steep”, the majority “loves” it.



**ZAGAT**