



THE TASTE OF BAJA

Coastal Mexico's street treat has become Orange County's burger alternative
by Amber Nasrulla

Fish tacos, the king of snacks from the Baja Peninsula, have become an Orange County fast-food staple. They're no more complicated than hamburgers, and the combination of tart lime, crunchy cabbage, and spicy *pico de gallo* makes them hyperbolically flavorful. With an abundance of establishments creating traditional and trendy tacos in our back yard, the challenge is to find the outstanding ones. These made *Orange Coast's* critical list, from a colorful drive-through in San Clemente to an upscale grill in Irvine. This ethnic favorite always hits the spot in beachy, multi-culti O.C.



Messy and delicious, fish tacos at Pedro's in San Clemente come bursting with fried cod, salsa, and crema.

1 • PEDRO'S TACOS

Battered wedges of cod, slathered with salsa and *crema* (Mexican cr me fra che sauce), are balanced perfectly between two plump, warm tortillas in this \$2.52 signature taco. The contents can spill out, so bring your own bib, or go in your swimsuit. Order at the drive-through and circle back for seconds. Hungry surfers and high schoolers line up for the magical chaos of these tacos. 550 N. El Camino Real, San Clemente, 949-498-5908, www.pedrostacos.com.

2 • CHRONIC TACOS

Teens in drainpipe jeans jockey for a spot in line at this petite taco shop in Corona del Mar. Behind a glass counter, an employee customizes your divine \$3.49 mahi-mahi taco with cheese, cabbage, lime, onions, cilantro, hot sauce, and a pink dressing. "You're not going to ask

me what's in the secret sauce, are you?" says manager Francisco Sanchez. Never. Don't go all Gordon Ramsay on us if we're wrong, but we're thinking ... blended chilies, salsa, red onion, and *crema*, with a little mayo. *Locations throughout Orange County, www.eatchronictacos.com.*

3 • TACO NAZO

Order quick before the rainbow selection of the salsa station distracts you. Radishes, pickled carrots, salsas, and fried, seasoned *chiles güeritos* fresh from the kitchen await. The \$1.69 fried or grilled white pollack fish tacos are delicious in their simplicity, topped with shredded cabbage, *crema*, chunky salsa, and a squeeze of lime, on corn tortillas. *121 S. Beach Boulevard, La Habra, 562-690-8078, www.taconazo.com.*

4 • WAHOO'S FISH TACO

Orange County's homegrown success story celebrates surfing, skating, and chillaxin'. Wallpapered with thousands of stickers, the joints have signed memorabilia, from skate-decks to BMX bikes, hanging from the rafters. The \$2.35 fish taco is delivered, open-faced, to the table. Marinated, blackened, then grilled, Cajun mahi-mahi is covered with shredded cabbage and spicy salsa. Douse it with lime. A fiery afternoon snack. *Locations throughout Orange County, www.wahoos.com.*

5 • THE LAZY DOG CAFE

Puppy portraits adorn the walls at these smartly casual restaurants with thick wood beams and soaring ceilings. Two fish tacos, served with a dome of rice and beans at \$9.95, come with nuggets of grilled ahi tuna, homemade tartar sauce, and sweet orange mango salsa laced with emerald green chilies. At the Anaheim location, with the Honda Center and Angel Stadium nearby, be ready to hustle for a booth on game nights. *Locations throughout Orange County, www.lazydogcafe.com.*

6 • OPAH RESTAURANT & BAR

The restaurant is named after moonfish that bring good luck to the fishermen who catch them. Two grilled flour tortillas lie like boats on a swirl of melted, roasted tomato butter. Inside the tacos,

two briquettes of grilled mahi-mahi are topped with *pico de gallo*, made tangy with a touch of balsamic vinegar. Served with a cool cucumber papaya salad, they're \$14. The décor is as contemporary as the cuisine: frosted glass, dark wood, and leather. *26851 Aliso Creek Road #C, Aliso Viejo, 949-360-8822; 13122 Jamboree Road, Irvine, 714-508-8055, www.opahrestaurant.com.*

7 • FISH HOUSE MARKET & GRILL

The mounted blue marlin reminds us of an East Coast fish 'n' chip shop filled with cantankerous mariners, but fresh-faced Santiago Canyon College students are the lunch-hour fixtures here. In the display case, shrimp, swordfish, and mahi-mahi wait to be cooked. Battered cod seasoned with lemon, garlic, and white pepper is served in two hearty corn gorditas topped with shredded red and green cabbage and served with a side dish for \$7.50; it's crunchy and light. \$2 buys a feast on Taco Tuesdays. *7626 E. Chapman Ave. #B, Orange, 714-289-2908.*

8 • TALÉO MEXICAN GRILL

Executive chef Jose Acevedo's pair of tacos—\$11 at lunch, \$15 at dinner—with Mexican rice and charro beans has a kick. He blackens red snapper or ono (depending on what's available that day) with a rub of cayenne pepper, chili powder, garlic, and other herbs. Then he grills the fish for a subtle, smoky barbecue flavor. Upscale Taléo has caramel leather sofas with large ottomans indoors, and deep, comfortable couches on the patio. It also showcases contemporary Mexican art. *3309 Michelson Drive, Irvine, 949-553-9002, www.taleogrill.com.*

9 • BILLY'S AT THE BEACH

With stunning views of the Back Bay, and lethal mai tais just a nod away, it's easy to forget the mission: fish tacos. Ono is served in two flour tortillas with smooth, blended salsa and broiled cheddar cheese. No shredded cabbage, no *crema*, but sour cream and guacamole are served on the side. These tacos, served with one side dish for \$12.95, are savory with a bit of sweetness and no overpowering spices. Mild and enfolded in soft tortillas, they're

ideal for fussy kids. Just remember: The bar is the big draw and the crowd can get boisterous at times. *2751 W. Coast Highway, Newport Beach, 949-722-1100.*

10 • EL FAROLITO

MEXICAN RESTAURANT

The parking lot is usually jammed outside the restaurant named "the little street lamp," decorated with faux Tiffany lamps and homemade tablecloths. Two corn tortillas cuddle slabs of lard-fried—but not battered—mahi-mahi, and come with tartar sauce with lots of jalapeño, chunky *pico de gallo*, shredded cabbage, rice, and beans for \$7.25. The Sandoval family has been cooking since 1974 and their use of traditional ingredients makes for a formidable taco: richer, heavier, more authentic, and more flavorful. *201 S. Bradford Ave., Placentia 714-993-7880, www.elfarolitomex.com.*

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