

THE VERVE PIPE



**AUGUST 22**  
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THE ESSENTIALS

UPPING YOUR CHICAGO RESTAURANT CRED ONE BITE AT A TIME



Carne asada tacos  
NANCY STONE/TRIBUNE FILE

**By Michael Nagrant** | FORREDEYE  
There's something about upholsterers. Lately I've noticed a link between those who once practiced the art of covering furniture and those who later perform creative, inspired endeavors. Jack White (The White Stripes, The Raconteurs, The Dead Weather), for example, got his start as an upholsterer.

And then there is Jose Luis Gonzalez, or as his family and friends call him, Tio Luis. He serves some of the best tacos in Chicago at a Brighton Park restaurant that bears his nickname.

Gonzalez immigrated to the United States from the Mexican state of Jalisco in 1967 and came to Chicago in 1968. He worked in a few factories and eventually ran his own upholstery business for 20 years before opening Tio Luis Tacos in 1996. "You can hide a lot of things—cheap materials, poor repair work—under a nice piece of fabric," he said. "But good upholsters pay attention to detail. They use high-quality materials even if no one can see it. That's something I always tried to do here in the kitchen. People might not see how you cook something, but they can taste it."

I never saw the chairs Gonzalez may have upholstered, but if they were anywhere near as good as his soulful bowl of carne en su jugo, featuring thick cuts of spicy steak stewing in a rich beefy broth with avocado and cilantro (\$7.50 at lunch, \$9.95 at dinner), they must have been something. Because it's often an intensive multi-hour process to make caldos (aka soups), most Mexican restaurants make them on the weekends, but not during the week. Gonzalez and his cooks serve that carne en su jugo and also a great fiery red pozole with hominy and chilis (\$5.95 at lunch,

TIO LUIS TACOS

3856 S. Archer Ave. 773-843-0098

**Looks like:** A brightly colored Mexican carnival filled with rustic ceramic tiles and brightly colored murals

**Smells like:** Griddled meat and the sweet perfume of caramelized onion

**Sounds like:** A sizzling grill

\$7.95 at dinner), plus other caldos every day of the week.

Gonzalez's real claim to fame, though, is his tacos. Tacos are botched everyday in so many corner joints in so many subtle ways: The tortillas are dry; the meat is under-seasoned, or it has been left to steam to a rubbery consistency in the corner of a flattop grill. Gonzalez's carne asada taco is cooked to order, salted well and spritzed with a touch of lime. His al pastor taco is rubbed with rust-colored adobo paste, which features a serious hit of garlic and oregano (\$2.25 each), and is punctuated with sweet bits of roasted pineapple.

While he worked in his father's taqueria as a kid, he has no formal culinary training. Instead, Gonzalez is an avid reader of cookbooks. When we spoke, he was just finishing up reading a book on southern Mexican cooking from Mexican-cooking authority Zarela Martinez. He attributes his success to a much more pedestrian influence, though. "When I opened, I looked at big brother, McDonald's," he said. "They may not make the best food, but there are no surprises. It is always the same. I knew I had to be consistent like them and work hard on that everyday."

MICHAEL NAGRANT IS A REDEYE SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR.