

RISKY BUSINESS

Picante's owner opens a taqueria across the street from legendary La Pasadita



By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE
It seems like culinary suicide to open a new taqueria in Chicago's tortilla nexus, aka the La Pasadita corridor near the corner of Ashland Avenue and Division Street. After all, La Pasadita has been the stalwart late-night carne asada beacon for the drinking masses and, more tellingly, many sober customers, for more than 38 years. Moving in on their territory feels a little like opening a hot dog cart outside of Hot Doug's, a futile and likely fatal enterprise. And yet, not only did Felipe Caro, owner of Picante in Wicker Park, open his new taqueria, Authentaco, across the street from two locations of La Pasadita, but he did so precisely inside the former location of the original La Pasadita opened by David Espinoza in 1976. Caro doesn't give much credence to karma or competition though. "It's like having Burger King across from a McDonald's," he said. "There's enough business for everyone." Considering that La Pasadita once ran three locations on the

same block and still competes against itself with two storefronts, Caro is probably on to something.

The tortillas: The staff at Authentaco hand-pressed their tortillas from fresh masa and griddled them to order. You can watch them bubble up like little corn-perfumed balloons on the flattop while you wait for your food. The texture of the finished product is light, almost like a cross between a flour and corn tortilla. You rarely find tortillas this fresh and good outside of Chicago's Maxwell Street Sunday market. "I don't know what it is, but lady who makes our tortillas does some voodoo to the masa. She's like pulling out a statue of the Virgen de Guadalupe and blessing that stuff," said Caro, laughing.

The tacos: Caro originally chose not to offer

a steak taco at Authentaco because he didn't want to be perceived as going head to head with La Pasadita, but that changed quickly. "In the first week, I think a hundred people walked in asking for carne asada and walked out, so now we have a carne asada taco and it's here to stay," he said. I'm glad for that, because the juicy, well-seasoned medium-rare bits of skirt steak were by far my favorite taco filling (\$3.25). Authentaco's carne asada is right up with Tio Luis and Taqueria El

Asadero as my favorite in Chicago. The barbacoa (shredded beef) also was incredibly juicy and peppery (\$3). The only real disappointment of the meat tacos was the pollo or chicken (\$3). I loved the pulled pork-like texture and flavor, but it needed more salt.

The quesadillas: On the vegetarian side, the huitlacoche quesadilla (\$4.50) was a rich mouth-watering bomb oozing with gooey chi-

huahua cheese. Huitlacoche—a grayish fungus that grows on corn crops—tastes like the very rich essence of a great mushroom crossed with the flavor of a fermented black bean. It's also hard to find at Chicago taquerias, so it's pretty cool that Authentaco offers it. Another rare quesadilla topping is flor de calabaza, or chopped squash blossom. Squash blossoms are fairly flavorless, and as such, are usually served in Italian spots stuffed with goat cheese and deep-fried. In a quesadilla (\$3), they offer some texture, but that's about it.

Bottom line: Authentaco is one of the better new taquerias to open in Chicago in the past few years. By offering plenty of vegetarian options as well as unique ingredients, it brings something unique to the taco landscape previously monopolized by the legendary La Pasadita empire located across the street.

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