

THE ESSENTIALS

UPPING YOUR CHICAGO RESTAURANT CRED ONE BITE AT A TIME

By Michael Nigrant | FOR REDEYE

When life gives you goats, make goat stew. That's essentially how Birrieria Zaragoza, one of Chicago's best goat stew and taco restaurants, was born. "I bought a new house before I sold my old one," owner John "Juan" Zaragoza said. "I thought, hey, I'll sell the old one quick. But that was during the housing downturn and I was stuck with two houses. So you know I got lemons, but made lemonade, or in this case I built an oven in the backyard to roast goats and started a catering business."

Zaragoza was born in a town called La Barca in the Mexican state of Jalisco. He was five years old when his family moved to Chicago, but his father took him back to Mexico every year so he wouldn't forget the language and culture. One of the things he remembered was the Jalisco specialty that is birria, steaming bowls of consommé stuffed full of chili-slathered goat meat, which became the inspiration for his restaurant.

He worked a series of customer service jobs before the catering gig, but the 2007 opening of the restaurant in Archer Heights allowed the father of four to work with his family. "When I left corporate America, I didn't realize I was going to enjoy life so much," Zaragoza said. "But I love how my family is here. I looked around one day and saw my wife Norma and my sons working beside me and I was overcome with emotion."

It is indeed a family business. Norma, who works the front of the house, is a sparkplug, a friendly motherly presence who always makes sure the tacos are hot and the conversation is warm. Their four sons help out as well.

It might sound cheesy, but I suspect some of that familial pride and happiness manifests itself in the food at Birrieria Zaragoza. On a recent weekend, I sampled birria at three popular spots around Chicago, and Zaragoza's (\$9 for a small plate, \$11.50 for large), which is rife with chili, crispy on the outside and super-tender on the inside, was by far the best.

It all starts with grass-fed goats from Woodstock, Ill. Zaragoza, who roasts 30 a week, said, "I think I'm one of the few guys who isn't getting frozen goat meat



Birria with salsa de molcajete
LENNY GILMORE/REDEYE PHOTOS



Birrieria Zaragoza



from Australia." Zaragoza rubs the goat with kosher salt and steams them for five hours. He then rubs them with an ancho chili-based molé sauce and roasts them for another 20 to 30 minutes in the oven so that a crispy bark develops, creating the contrasting texture that I loved

so much. The goat is topped with a tomato-based consommé (\$2.50-\$6.50 if purchased a la carte) seasoned with 11 spices and herbs. "My son Jonathan likes to say, 'Dad you're not the colonel [Sanders of KFC].' But, I do use a secret blend of herbs and spices." Goat lovers can bring their vegetarian friends too, since, unlike many other places that infuse their consommé with drippings from the roast goat, Zaragoza keeps his completely

BIRRIERIA ZARAGOZA

4852 S. Pulaski Road 773-523-3700

Looks like: An old-school diner with chrome- and vinyl-trimmed counter seating
Sounds like: The thwack of a cleaver as each piece of roasted goat is sliced to order
Smells like: Roasting meat and chilis

meat-free—until it gets muddled with a side of goat in order to make the birria.

Tortillas (\$1) are made and freshly griddled daily. The salsa molcajete (\$3.75), a candy red-colored brew, is also made in-house by grinding fire-toasted arbol chilis, tomato and garlic in a mortar and pestle.

Because they work with whole goats, Zaragoza also serves a couple of offal-laden tacos (\$3), a "goat head" taco and the secret off-menu Machito. The former features cheek, tongue, brain and some eyeball, while the latter is made with braided stomach and intestine. This might sound gross, but as Zaragoza said, "I didn't really think it was a great idea at first myself. I don't actually love organ meats. But we get this great meat in and we want to serve everything, so we worked on it and the texture is just amazing. It's really not gamey at all and it has incredible flavor. It surprised even me."

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