

eat & drink

BEFORE YOU GO

Rubi's will be closed
on May 29 and reopen
June 5.



Al pastor tacos at Rubi's
NICK KINDELSPERGER/TRIBUNE

the essentials

UPPING YOUR CHICAGO RESTAURANT CRED ONE BITE AT A TIME

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

The demand for Rubi's at Maxwell Street Market is so real that when Mayor Emanuel stopped by a few years ago to buy tacos, he couldn't find a place to sit down and eat them. "He ordered a squash blossom—or flor de calabaza—taco, and the stand was packed. He had to leave and eat it on the street. We felt bad," said Evelyn Ramirez Landa, daughter of owners Gilberto Ramirez and Maria Landa.

It wasn't always that way. In 1997, they opened the stand at the suggestion of Ramirez' mother, Basilisa Diaz, who'd been selling produce at the Maxwell Street Market since the early 1990s. Though they had no

restaurant experience, Landa learned to cook from her mother and had a wealth of recipes including a thick, spicy red mole made from toasted ancho, pasilla and guajillo chilies that she sold at the stand. Back then, the opera-

tion didn't even have a name.

"People would call us 'los de mole' or 'the mole people' when they were looking for us," Ramirez Landa said. "I remember starting to work at the stand when I was 11 and it was slow enough [that] I could just walk around the market and look at stuff. Today, I'm 30 and we're so busy I can't leave if I want to."

The stand didn't get its name until 2000, when Ramirez Landa's youngest sister, Rubi, was born.

"She's 16 now, and she just started working at the stand," she said.

The whole thing is a true family affair. On any given Sunday, Ramirez can be heard

RUBI'S AT MAXWELL STREET MARKET
800 S. Desplaines St. 773-318-9526

Looks like: A backyard barbecue
Sounds like: The clash of metal as owner Gilberto Ramirez hones his knives
Smells like: Burning charcoal and roasted corn

bellowing "Yes! Yes! Yes!" while wielding a scimitar-like carving blade and shaving pork al pastor from a charcoal roasting spit. Landa and other family members hand-pat fresh masa into tortilla rounds and pop them on a charcoal-fired grill.



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Ricarda Hernandez places tortillas on the grill at Rubi's. STACEY WESCOTT/TRIBUNE FILE PHOTOS

Meats, veggies and sauces bubble and spit in cast-iron pans on the stove. Ramirez Landa's brother Gilberto slices the carne asada for the steak tacos.

When I started visiting the stand in 2006, you could walk up, order and in about two minutes have a quesadilla overflowing with gooey chihuahua cheese, an inky black huitlacoche-stuffed taco (super-tasty corn fungus often called the Mexican truffle) or tacos with rust-colored mole over hunks of silky braised pork leg (all \$3 each). Fast-forward to today and the line is usually about 45 minutes long.

"In 2011, Rick Bayless took Andrew Zimmern of Travel Channel's 'Bizarre Foods' here, and there have been lines ever since," Ramirez Landa said.

You might be asking yourself whether or not a taco is worth that kind of wait. I asked myself the same thing as I stood in line. So I sent some of my friends to a bunch of the other stands in the market, all of which had no lines, and snacked on their offerings while I waited for Rubi's. Some of the other stands had good tortillas, and others had great meat, but few had universally well-seasoned meat or the super-fresh tortillas of Rubi's.

About a week before my most recent visit, I'd actually decided I was over corn tortillas. Having tasted so many mealy lukewarm,



Al pastor meat on the spit at Rubi's

double-wrapped options from restaurants around town, I was convinced that though I might seem like an amateur, I would only eat flour tortillas from now on. But then I bit into that thick, hand-patted, smoke-perfumed tortilla from Rubi's and I lost my mind. Corn still beats flour, and Rubi's tacos, well, they beat all.

MICHAEL NAGRANT IS A REDEYE SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR. REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED, AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE. @REDEYEATRINK | REDEYE@REDEYECHICAGO.COM

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