



diningout

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GOT SALT?

Antique Taco could be awesome with a pinch more seasoning

Gandhi felled a colonial empire with it. Liverpool and a 16th century Polish empire were built upon valuable reserves of it. The British blockaded ships filled with it to prevent the colonists from preserving food during the Revolutionary War.

"It" is salt. And it makes the world go round.

Salt is all-powerful, the emperor of seasonings. The way a chef salts his fare is everything: The single biggest difference between a great restaurant and merely a good one comes down to the kitchen's ability to season. And by that standard, Antique Taco, a new restaurant in Wicker Park, is merely good.

This is unfortunate, because so much of what's happening at this new taco joint spells greatness. As much as it

trades in hot dogs and pizzas, Chicago is also a city of taquerias. But most of those places serve gray meats that have moldered away and steamed within an inch of disintegration. In many ways, Antique Taco is the antidote to all of that, one of the most



The horchata milk shake is one of the best in the city — despite being served with a nettlesome paper straw.



Antique Taco's adobo rubbed pork carnitas tacos are a highlight. | RICHARD A. CHAPMAN-SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

thoughtful taquerias (Chef Rick Ortiz brings some of the lessons he learned working at the celebrated four-star Courtwright's here) aside from nearby Big Star to come around in a long time.

The tortillas at Antique Taco are warm, redolent with corn perfume, and satisfyingly chewy with a touch of flour. They are stuffed with tender, glistening, grill-marked ribeye larded with

hunks of gooey cheese and gorgeous juicy bits of tomato. They are also filled with fulsome cubes of chili-rubbed chicken bathed in honeyed yogurt. Some have plump tempura-battered flaky planks of fish smothered in a tongue-melting sriracha-spiked tartar sauce and princely purple ribbons of smoked cabbage. And others are brimming with funky mushrooms, toothsome pickled

cauliflower florets and Barbie Dream House-pink onions and wilted garlicky kale.

But without a lifting pinch of salt, the chili in the chicken comes off as dusty, and the ribeye is flat. The mushroom's natural funk fades and the kale's greenness smacks too much of eating raw from the garden. This taco needs a crispy counterpoint, for the pickled bits are not

crunchy enough to mitigate a monotony of soft cooked vegetable flesh. The fish taco is choked by the smoke from the cabbage, and the smiting chili in the tartar sauce is almost unbearable without a little salinity.

The house guacamole is velvety and creamy, a pure verdant mound of goodness. A dollop of the stuff is nutty, but the natural sweetness of the avocado does

not punch through without a salty counterpoint.

One thing at Antique Taco that does not suffer the absence of brine: the adobo rubbed pork carnitas lacquered in tamarind, sprinkled with curls of bacon and a shower of crumbly queso fresco. It is as perfect as a taco can be.

Like the carnitas taco, the corn-off-the-cob salad, a delightful melange of sweet corn,



The corn off the cob salad is a winner thanks to the tasty combination of veggies and seasoning.

ANTIQUE TACO ★

1360 N. Milwaukee (773) 687-8697; antiquetaco.com

Hours: Noon – 10 p.m. Tuesday – Thursday; Noon – midnight, Friday & Saturday; noon – 8 p.m. Sunday

Prices: Tacos \$7-8; salads, sides and appetizers \$6-11; Desserts \$3-5

Try: Carnitas taco, corn off the cob salad, horchata milk shake

In a bite: Thoughtful, well-constructed gourmet tacos (that could use a touch more salt) and killer horchata milk shakes all served amidst shabby chic bric-a-brac.

KEY: ★★★★★ Extraordinary; ★★★★★ Excellent; ★★ Very Good; ★ Good; Zero stars: Poor

buttery Parmesan, plump black beans, tangy red pepper and perfectly seasoned.



Antique Taco's chili cheese curds try hard, but end up being ordinary.

But such reverie does not last long. A masa biscuit is flaky, light and buttery, girded by hunks of tender lobster. But the whole affair is smothered in an oily gravy that, yep, you guessed it, needs more salt.

Not all failures at Antique Taco are traceable to salt. A bowl of chili topped with fried cheese curds features righteous-

ly deep-fried, squeaky Cheddar, but the chili underneath is a chunky, thick, chorizo-filled brew that invokes the cheap stuff most corner shacks drizzle on chili cheese fries. Maybe that's the point — this is an attempt to tap in to a familiar nostalgia. But I prefer a heady mole-like Mexican chili or a runny, allspice-dashed Cincinnati-style bowl.



An old scale contributes to the Wicker Park taqueria's funky, retro vibe.

A pitcher of rosemary margarita served in a vintage milk jug channels some kind of charming farmstead hoedown, but ultimately the mix is watery, and the tequila is muddled and lost.

The service, except for an odd parsimony with ice (we ask for some for our water and our tumblers are filled with about 4 tiny cubes each), is delightful and responsive. The room, an amalgamation of architectural salvage and thrift store kitsch featuring a vintage scale, an old-timey marching band base drum and secondhand cookbooks, is pretty cool. (I once considered buying the old "restaurant" sign from a local antique store that ultimately ended up behind the Antique Taco counter.)

The Horchata milk shake also has a nice throwback soda shop quality. Featuring a sweet swirl of cinnamon and almond, it's a haunting liquid invocation of the world's best rice pudding, and gets my vote for one of the best milk shakes in Chicago. It comes with a paper straw, which elicits memories of sucking down sour sugar from a Pixy Stix. It's a nice trip down memory lane, but the unfortunate thing with both Pixy Stix and the shakes, after a while those straws get wet and gummy and you're left sucking on paper.

Michael Nagrant is a local freelance writer. E-mail the Sun-Times Dining section at diningout@suntimes.com with questions and comments.