



diningout

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Maybe it's not traditional, but the habanero burger at Del Toro Tequila Bar and Restaurant in Pilsen is a knockout.
RICHARD A. CHAPMAN-SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

THE TACO GUYS

Pilsen brothers deliver upscale Mexican fare

In Chicago, there have always been “guys” you go to when you needed to get something done in the neighborhood. Sometimes it’s legendary aldermen, or the unofficial “mayors” of this town or that street.

In Pilsen, there’s a lesser-known family that’s been making things happen for years: the Garcias. And, with Del Toro restaurant and bar, their newest Pilsen venture, they are very much getting it done.

Froylan Garcia immigrated to Chicago from San Luis Potosi, Mexico, started working in factories around

Chinatown and then found his way to General Motors. He started buying up Pilsen real estate, including what is now F&R Liquor (2129 S. Halsted) and La Favorita No. 2 Grocery (1925 S. May). Froylan’s son’s Evy and Andy run the liquor store. The Garcia boys, who count local May St. Cafe chef Mario Santiago as a friend, have good taste. They’ve tapped into the thirsts of the burgeoning artist and hipster colonies taking over the neighborhood, and offer one of the wider selections of craft beer in Chicago at F&R.

Every Sunday morning, a few



Del Toro's queso fundido studded with caramelized bits of smoky steak is "pure comfort."



Del Toro's fish tacos feature wispy fillets of smoky, grill-marked tilapia topped with a crisp pico de gallo. They are a highlight of the taco offerings.

DEL TORO ★★½

2133 S. Halsted
(312) 733-7144;
deltorochicago.com

Hours: 5 p.m.–2 a.m. Monday–Friday; 5 p.m.–3 a.m. Saturday

Prices: Appetizers: \$2.50–\$5; Tacos, burritos & burgers, \$3–\$7; desserts, \$3–\$5

Try: Steak queso fundido, puerco adobada taco, Del Toro Burger, tres leches cake

In a bite: Spot-on tacos, killer margaritas and a tres leches cake to weep for, this is the model for what an upscale taqueria/bar should be.

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

blocks away at La Favorita, the Garcia brothers' mother Rosa rises early to cook up 600 pounds of killer beef cheek barbacoa. She sells the beef by the pound at the back of La Favorita to hungry locals. It, along with the house-made garlic and cumin-perfumed chorizo, is some of the better taco meat in Chicago.

While I loved the tacos at La Favorita, I had my doubts about Del Toro. The brothers seemed smart and their recipes were solid, but restaurant ventures fell even the most capable of dining professionals.

But Del Toro, it turns out, is the

oasis for those waiting hours to get a seat on the Big Star patio or in the Frontera Grill dining room. While Del Toro doesn't "gourmet things up" with pork belly like Big Star, or use the pristine local organic bounty of Midwestern farmers like Rick Bayless, it's pretty much the prototype for what an upscale taqueria should be.

And when you consider that none of the food at Del Toro costs more than \$7, I use the term "upscale" more to refer to the granite bar top and the leather dining chairs than any kind of price inaccessibility. The crowd at Del Toro is made up of mostly young, cosmopolitan Latinos and Latinas on dates or celebrating ladies night.

And though I'm a Polish bro from the north, I, who once consumed a goat eyeball taco, know Mexican food. And on that count, the queso fundido — a shallow crock of gooey chihuahua cheese studded with caramelized bits of smoky steak served with warm puffy tacos for dipping — is pure comfort.

Ceviche, studded with flaky hunks of lime-spritzed whitefish, is refreshing, although one wishes for freshly fried-to-order chips to scoop it up rather than the pre-made though solid corn chips on offer. I'd tell you specifically what kind of whitefish was in the ceviche, but our waitress didn't know and didn't ask the kitchen when I inquired. If there's a weakness at Del Toro, it's the waitstaff. When you drain one cocktail, and that's bound to happen with well-balanced, \$7, fresh-squeezed-lime house margaritas and \$8 rum-

soaked horchatas, it often takes a while to get another.

The *Carne Apache*, a Mexican riff on steak tartare featuring finely ground raw beef studded with spicy chili and tangy lime juice, is ceviche for unrepentant carnivores.

Sopes — pillowy corn masa rafts — are piled high with a beautiful mound of the Garcias' housemade chorizo, crispy romaine, tiny crumbles of queso fresco and a drizzle of sour cream.

Tacos are served on a traditional

double tortilla set-up and meats feature crispy brown crusts and juicy interiors. Steak and chicken are both excellent, but it's the glossy orange-lacquered pork or *Puerco adobada* version — where the meat gets rubbed with a nice slather of vinegar-tanged paprika, oregano, garlic and salt — that's the best of the protein tacos. The fish taco is also quite beautiful.

Instead of typical heavy, deep-fried nuggets slathered in lime crema served elsewhere, the Garcias' fish tacos feature wispy fillets of smoky,

grill-marked tilapia topped with a crisp pico de gallo. Mom's famous barbacoa is also available on Saturdays only.

But tacos and ceviche you expect. It's the burger, featuring thin, griddled patties stuffed with chihuahua cheese and fiery habanero dripping with chipotle crema, that really knocks me on my head.

For dessert, the Garcia brothers tap another Pilsen stalwart, offering up moist *chocoflan* and a game-changing tres leches cake from nearby Kristoffer's. Kristoffer's sell all kinds of flavors of tres leches cake in their cafe, but the version done for Del Toro — soaked with Three Garcia's tequila and Mexican pecan egg nog liqueur — is maybe the best tres leches I have ever had. It simultaneously weeps sweet cream, but somehow is not soggy. The nutmeg-spiced crumb is truly addictive. If there's a secret to the Garcias' ability to get things done in Pilsen, this is most definitely it. A man might compromise a lot for a single bite.

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



The delightful tres leches cake is made specifically for Del Toro by nearby Kristoffer's.