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Counter Intuitive

Chef Victor Albisu brings his popular fast-casual taqueria to Rockville.

BY RINA RAPUANO

"IT'S A LONG WAY TO THE TOP if you want to rock and roll!" AC/DC rips through the dining room at Taco Bamba in Rockville's Congressional Plaza on a steamy summer midafternoon, bouncing off the corrugated metal that dominates many of the interior walls. It's loud, but it sets a vibe that has worked well for the mini chain of counter-service taquerias from award-winning chef-owner Victor Albisu. You might even catch him playing air drums on the way out of the kitchen.

He seems relaxed now, but Albisu admits that he's always a bit nervous before an opening — he has five Taco Bambas in

Virginia in addition to this first Maryland location, which opened in early June — wondering if each new version will connect with the community the way his first Falls Church location did when it opened in 2013. Turns out, he needn't have worried.

"The line almost got to BuyBuy Baby when we opened," he says, referring to the destination baby-gear emporium at the other end of the large shopping center. "The people here have been incredible, incredibly understanding. I'm like, 'The wait's two hours,' and they would be like, 'As long as you have food, we'll wait.'"

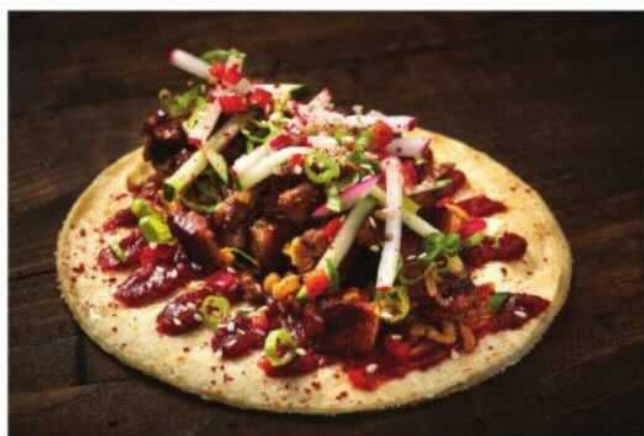
Since graduating from Le Cordon Bleu

School in Paris, Albisu has opened and closed two fine-dining restaurants — Del Campo and Poca Madre — in downtown D.C.; won accolades from the Restaurant Association of Metropolitan Washington; beaten Bobby Flay on Flay's eponymous Food Network show; and been nominated twice as Best Chef Mid-Atlantic by the James Beard Foundation. But for Albisu, who grew up in Northern Virginia with a Cuban father and Peruvian mother, building a local taqueria empire is what he currently finds fulfilling.

"I don't want to overstate this, but this is like my life's work right now," he says. "I have



Chef Victor Albisu and an assortment of Taco Bamba favorites, including the Mrs. Hogan (top).



a very clear mentality that every space and every day needs to be earned, and we need to be [working] with that kind of mindset. So it's never a set-it-and-forget-it. I'm in these stores all the time. For me, it's one of the coolest eras of my career, for sure."

The music downshifts to Blondie's "Heart of Glass," a song that goes down just as easily as the Grapefruit Vanilla Paloma spiked with mezcal (\$9.50). The cocktail, incidentally, is a great way to #prepar-yourmouth (an apt hashtag used by the restaurant) for the intense and varied tacos, tortas, nachos and other flavor-packed items on the menu — several of which are exclusive to the Rockville location, such as the Fredneck BBQ filled with roasted pork shoulder, spicy slaw, pickled onions, jalapeño and cilantro.

"My chef de cuisine at this restaurant and my senior corporate chef are from Frederick, so I feel like we're OK to use the terminology. They are card-carrying Frednecks," Albisu jokes.

It's worth ordering, along with the Mrs.

Hogan, an homage to Maryland's Korean-born first lady Yumi Hogan. Apparently, she hasn't been in to try it yet but is pleased with having a taco stuffed with kalbi pork, gochujang, kimchi bacon fried rice, cucumber and radish named after her.

These can be found on the tacos nuestros side of the menu, which features creative riffs on what a taco can be, and each costs \$4.50. Tacos tradicionales, which include taqueria classics like al pastor, carnitas, barbacoa and carne asada, go for \$3.50 apiece. The price exception is the birria taco (\$9), a style of taco from the Jalisco region that's filled with roasted goat and Chihuahua cheese before being fried and served with a broth called consomé for dunking. The rich, comforting taco is definitely having a moment around this region.

While the tacos tradicionales are also excellent, the real fun of a Taco Bamba (besides the cranked music and the craft cocktails) are the tacos that take advantage of what fine-dining chefs can do with one of

America's most beloved street-food imports.

Take the Fauda Fried Chicken taco, which draws upon the wildly popular Mediterranean cuisine trend by incorporating a za'atar spice blend along with tehina mango ketchup, yogurt, dill, mint and fresno chilies to dress up crispy chicken thigh nuggets. It's all served on a flour tortilla — unlike most of the tacos here served on corn tortillas — and it's a table favorite, along with the Indian-inspired El Rancho Rasul that folds together chipotle curry chorizo, hash browns and a mint-cilantro chutney.

"I love this kind of food coming out of a fast-casual space that happens to have a bar, and right off of Rockville Pike, where people are getting hair dryers next door," Albisu says. "It's so much fun to me. I can't tell you how people have been so understanding and happy to have us here. It's been great."

Taco Bamba, 1627 Rockville Pike; 301-822-2334; tacobamba.com/location/rockville/