

A menu crafted like an artful set list

Taco Bamba is a hit factory that stays fresh by giving us the unexpected

BY TIM CARMAN

The Taco Bamba in Chinatown is so crowded, and the music so cranked, that I feel as if I've just wandered unwittingly into the mosh pit of a Metallica concert. I'm half-expecting to take an elbow to the head.

Relax. There's no real danger here, unless you're afraid of taquerias that embrace anarchy. Maybe anarchy isn't the right word for the four shops — it'll be five later this year — that make up chef Victor Albusu's Taco Bamba chain-let. Each location shares enough DNA with the others — the branding, the menu boards, the metal, hypermasculine atmosphere — that they all feel of a piece. But each taqueria is also not a factory-stamped replica of the original Taco Bamba in Falls Church (2190 Pimmit Dr., 703-639-0505), which debuted in 2013.

Sure, some tacos are available across all menus, but each location also has its own customized dishes. It makes for an open-ended taco chain, an approach that would give many empire builders fits. Standardization. Familiarity. Uniformity across units. These are the principles that have been driving chains since McDonald's sold 15-cent hamburgers in Southern California in the 1950s. But these principles, no matter how important, do not drive Albusu's imagination.

Pearl Jam drives Albusu's imagination.

"My very favorite band in the world is Pearl Jam," says the Northern Virginia native, who grew up playing guitar in hard rock bands.

"One of the big reasons I love them so much as a live act is that they never play the same show twice. Every show, every set list, is always different, and if they do [repeat], it's by mistake," the chef continues. "I love the draw of, 'I don't know what I'm going to get, and I'm going to love it anyway.'"

Albusu has applied the same philosophy to his Taco Bamba chain. The best way to experience the elastic nature of these taquerias is through their Tacos Nuestros menus, where Albusu and fellow company chef Tom Hall acknowledge few boundaries. They borrow from cultures near and far, from Washington burger joints to Middle Eastern bazaars, to create a whole new world of tacos. There is some fine noshing on these free-for-all menus, despite the fact that many tacos come wrapped in pre-made tortillas, flavorful enough but frequently firm and woody.

Each of the four locations has its own fish taco, which is four times more than most area taco chains have. The Chinatown spot (777 I St. NW, 202-289-7377) comes on strong with the Sid Vicious, a generous length of fried cod paired with malt vinegar and chile-heavy salsa macha. It's an Anglo-

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When was the last time you saw tacos this varied from a chain? Taco Bamba, with four taquerias in the region and a fifth one on the way, uses flavors from a range of global cuisines. And each location has a different, customized menu.



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Latino hybrid that has the kind of umami funk that you'd expect in a Southeast Asian dish.

The appropriately named Sid Vicious, with its ringlets of jalapeño, is an incandescent concoction, but only a notch or two spicier than the seemingly innocuous San Diahhgo fish taco at the Bamba in Vienna (164 Maple Ave. W., 703-436-6339). The latter features grilled grouper slipped into a flour tortilla with, among other garnishes, a "Burgundy slaw" spiked with chile flakes. The taco and the slaw are references to Ron Burgundy, the lovable blowhard at the center of the "Anchorman" comedies. Despite the bloated, white-bread culture that inspired the taco's name, this bite packs heat. It's two tickets to the gun show.

There are little nods to each neighborhood in which Taco Bamba resides, among others more tongue-in-cheek than some. The Springfield taqueria (6691-A Backlick Rd., 703-436-1262), in the same shopping center as a Chick-fil-A, serves up a fried chicken taco dubbed the Vic-fil-A Deluxe. Pieces of crispy chicken share space inside a flour tortilla with bacon crumbles, pickled red chiles and a drizzle of chipotle mayo, their flavors more immediate with only a thin wrapper, and not a bun, between you and the fillings.

You don't have to sweat the bun-to-meat ratio in the Royale With Cheese in Chinatown, either. The patty-melt preparation is a nod not just to "Pulp Fiction" but also to the District's unofficial status as the burger capital of America, an identity largely established by the previous tenants of 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., known lovers of ground beef. The Royale With Cheese looks like someone



Taco Bamba chef-owner Victor Albusu, top, at the outpost in Chinatown, applied an expect-the-unexpected philosophy to his small chain of taquerias, which offer combinations such as the Amaras, above, which has beef tendon, mint and basil.

dumped a taco bowl onto a flour tortilla, but eats much better than that. The Drunken Master, a Kung Pao shrimp taco, is a more recognizable homage to Chinatown than the patty melt. It's also more refined, with its earthy hint of miso-agave rice just below the canopy of the taco's crown fire.

Roy Choi in Los Angeles built a mini empire off Korean-Mexican street tacos. Albusu, whose family tree branches off into both Peru and Cuba, is far too restless to settle on any one hybrid. His creative mind sort of walks the earth, to quote again from "Pulp Fiction." The best include his Banh-Mijo (available in Vienna), a banh-mi riff that somehow marries chicken liver pate with a corn tortilla; his Faiz Ali Bamba (Springfield), a Middle Eastern-inspired taco with braised goat, chile yogurt, za'atar and tabbouleh; and Maketto chef Erik Bruner-Yang's guest taco, the Amaras

(Chinatown), an absolutely uncompromising bite with chorizo larb, serrano pepper and beef tendon, which is both crispy and gelatinous.

I don't mean to ignore the vegetarian offerings at Taco Bamba. They include the Spicy 'Shroom (available at all locations), a meaty portobello taco that strikes me as more acidic than spicy, yet slammable all the same. There's even a taco in Falls Church that, at first glance, might seem vegetarian. It's not. La Poutine is a variation on Canadian poutine in which french fries are layered into corn tortillas along with pickled onions, cotija cheese and spicy mayo. Those fries, however, are coated with barbacoa jus and sprinkled with almost microscopic bits of bacon.

As the stuttering guitar of ZZ Top's "La Grange" rattles off the hard surfaces inside this taqueria, I imagine the poutine taco, with its double dose of starch, would pair well with a cold pitcher of Mexican lager. Too bad none is available. Each location of Albusu's budding chain may have some great tacos, but they don't all have liquor licenses. The Falls Church taqueria is totally dry.

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Q: I was wondering if you have any recommendations for Alexandria dining under \$25 per entree for a special occasion or just casual dining. I have been to **the Majestic** in Old Town (okay) and **Southside 815** (great po' boys). **A:** A couple places I like include **Hummingbird** for seafood with a view, **Vermilion** for pastas (and duck liver croquettes!), in particular, and **Royal Nepal** for very good dumplings and lamb dishes.

Q: I'm one of your readers who doesn't eat at most of the restaurants you review, because I keep kosher, but I do enjoy your writing style. I was recently told that several vegan restaurants in Maryland and the District have been certified kosher, and I was wondering whether you've reviewed any of them: **Evolve** (Cedar Street NW), **Vegaritos Vegan** (Fourth Street NW), **Sweet and Natural** (Mount Rainier) and **Everlasting Life** (Capitol Heights).

A: I may have to change my eating-out schedule based on this promising list. Thanks for sharing. The names are new to me. For vegan (if not kosher) in the city, the best place right now is the just-opened **Fancy Radish** in the Atlas District.

Q: I live in trendy Logan Circle but am looking for a restaurant to celebrate at that is more on the quiet and elegant side, and less on the trendy side. I am open to new ideas but am thinking about a beautiful view, or elegant decor, quiet-ish for nice conversation. We have a car, so it can be anywhere in the region.

A: Everyone I've taken to **Del Mar** in the Wharf is struck by the decor, the service and the Spanish cooking, all of which can now be enjoyed on the restaurant's second-floor balcony. My second choice, also from chef Fabio Trabocchi, is **Fiola Mare**, the Italian seafood establishment in Georgetown.

Q: We're coming to the District for vacation soon. We live in a little town (we have all the groups covered: Olive Garden and Applebee's) and my kids (13 and 9) like going to big cities and trying food they've only seen on TV. Their favorite "big city" places they've been to are Girl and the Goat in Chicago and Junoon in New York. We are staying near the White House. What are some fun places in Washington we should try? Requirements: takes reservations, welcomes (not just tolerates) kids, accessible by walking/public transit. Casual enough for us to

go in sightseeing clothes. We already have a reservation at Rasika.

A: You sound like awesome parents, and how smart of you to do some research ahead of your visit. In Shaw, I think you'd enjoy the Hong Kong-style of food and decor at **Tiger Fork**, tucked into Blagden Alley. For seafood and a view, you can't beat **the Salt Line**, a neighbor to Nationals Park on the Anacostia River. This being a world capital, you'll want to dip into something international, maybe tapas at **Jaleo** in Penn Quarter or meals you eat with floppy tangy bread at **Ethiopic** on H Street NE.

Q: I'm going to a concert at the Anthem on my birthday, and I was planning on treating myself to a nice dinner beforehand at **Kith & Kin**. I am wondering if you think it's necessary to make a reservation online when it's just a party of one, or if hoping there's seating available at the bar around, say, 5:30 p.m. on a Tuesday evening before a concert will do.

A: By all means, make a reservation for restaurants that take them in the Wharf, where business booms on concert nights. Early on a recent Sunday, I was told by a host at the new **Kaliwa** that it would be 90 minutes for a table for two. This was at 5:30.

Q: Recently I've noticed a lot of glowing 2½-star reviews from you and wondered what the distinction is between 3- and 2½-star places, since I'm not sure I can always discern one from reading alone. On a related note, has the influx of quality options in recent years made you a stricter grader? **A:** I think I've always been a conservative grader. I'd much prefer that readers leave a place I've reviewed wondering, "Why is he so stingy with stars?" than for them to think I throw accolades around with abandon.

To your questions: It's sometimes a fine line — a dish or two, a service issue — separating 2½ ("good/excellent") from 3 stars ("excellent") and yes, the swarm of ambitious restaurants has raised the bar in recent years. But if you were to line up say, all the restaurants with three stars from The Washington Post, hopefully you'd see some unifying thread, no matter their cuisine or design style.

● Tom Sietsema hosts a weekly Q&A on Wednesdays at 11 a.m. at live.washingtonpost.com.