



The Robinson Ramen taco from Taco Bamba incorporates shoyu carnitas and noodles fresh noodles crisped up on a flat top. | Greg Powers/Courtesy of Taco Bamba

DC RESTAURANT OPENINGS

How D.C.'s Mexican Food Mad Scientist Makes a Ramen Taco Work

Taco Bamba's new Fairfax location sells the specialty

by [Gabe Hiatt](#) | Dec 7, 2018, 9:53am EST

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Local chain Taco Bamba opened its fifth location yesterday, giving decorated chef Victor Albisu another venue that combines his passion for traditional Mexican street food with an irreverent side that can't help but ask, why can't a bowl of soup become a taco?

The new Taco Bamba inside University Mall in Fairfax sells a "Robinson Ramen" taco — a nod to nearby Robinson Secondary School — engineered by Albisu and chef de cuisine Tom Hall. Although the name features a high school, the idea to put ramen in a taco came from integrating a diet staple for the students at George Mason University across the street from the new location.

"It originally started off as a college thing," says Albisu, a George Mason alumnus. "Oh ramen noodles, ramen noodles in a taco. It's funny. It's ironic. Now can we make it good?"

To do that, Albisu and Hall began to deconstruct a bowl of the Japanese speciality and see how they could fuse it with Mexican flavors. Because pork is a major player in many ramen bowls, Albisu and Hall decided they'd make carnitas that incorporated shoyu, Japanese-style soy sauce, into the base. Albisu notes that star anise also naturally lends itself to carnitas and ramen.

Unlike college kids, Taco Bamba won't buy instant noodles. Hall has sourced fresh ones that the kitchen quickly boils and finishes on the flat top to add a crunchy texture to the taco.

Albisu says a ramen broth tweaked with citrus and chiles is "hyper-reduced" before being tossed with the braised pork and noodles. Complementary elements in the taco include two ramen staples in canned corn and scallions, salsa machado, and a togarashi spice tartar sauce that incorporates eggs and Kewpie mayonnaise.

"It's a really crazy combination," Albisu says, "but I'm really enjoying it, and we'll see how long it lasts."



Chef Victor Albisu, right, wields an alcohol-spraying gun at the Cochon 555 event in 2015. | [Rey Lopez/Eater D.C.](#)

There's plenty of precedent for Albisu fusing other cultures into his taquerias. Along with the Fairfax location, the four other Taco Bambas (Falls Church, Vienna, Springfield, Chinatown) all serve their own specialties from a *nuestros tacos* (our tacos) section of the menu.

Albisu used to make a "Seven Corners shrimp" mimicking a Vietnamese spring roll with fish sauce and Thai basil. In Springfield, Taco Bamba sells an Orange Julio margarita because Albisu and his friends used to hang out at the Orange Julius in the nearby mall. One of the new tacos in Fairfax is an Ol' Mick Nugget taco that's a tribute to Albisu's trips to the McDonald's in University Mall.

The chef says he'd like to stop selling the poutine taco at the original in Falls Church, but there's an uproar from customers every time he takes it off the menu. When it was time to consider whether a ramen taco was a step too far, Albisu thought of the *la poutina* taco.

"When you put French fries in a taco, you've kind of thrown caution to the wind as it is," he says with a laugh.

Albisu notes that all his taco inventions help brand Taco Bamba as a place that doesn't take itself too seriously, but he wouldn't consider messing with the form if the restaurants didn't take a painstaking approach to classics such as al pastor, carnitas, birria (spicy stewed goat), lengua (beef tongue), and tripe.

"All those things, we really take pride in nailing that," Albisu says. "[It's] that flavor that you would get in the street vendor market or the grandmother's house. That is our goal beyond all else, to have that level of authenticity."



The Ol' Mick Nugget taco from Taco Bamba in Fairfax. | Greg Powers/Courtesy of Taco Bamba

The chef has Cuban and Peruvian heritage, but his ties to Mexican cuisine run deep. He grew up serving Mexican customers at Latin markets run by his mother and his aunt, eventually graduating to the butcher shop at those places, which he describes as "bodegas." He came up working the line alongside Mexican chefs, digging into the food they cooked for staff meals.

"When you cook with Mexican people your whole career, it leaves a mark on you," he says.

Albisu, who opened the first Taco Bamba in 2013, won the 2015 Restaurant Association Metropolitan Washington award for Chef of the Year after opening a South American steakhouse, Del Campo. This year, he converted Del Campo into a Mexican fine-dining restaurant, Poca Madre.

Japanese elements are making their way into more than just tacos in Albisu's kitchens. Poca Madre this month unveiled a pre-set taco omakase menu, following the Japanese tradition of letting the chef choose a progressive menu for diners.

Pairing his reverence for irreverence with fine-dining sensibilities, Albisu acknowledges he loves the polarity of his cooking.

"I would never want to be in the middle," he says.

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