



There's something about Mary

A love letter to the definitive Chico-style taqueria

It felt like one of those eerie calm-before-the-storm moments as I pedaled my bike up to the intersection of Fifth and Ivy streets. Chico State students would return in a week and this epicenter of the south campus hood

would go back to being arguably the loudest and liveliest area in the city. But on that Monday morning it was dead quiet as I rounded the corner and rolled up to a shabby, standalone hole in the wall for one last taste of a local culinary icon—the Tacos Mary burrito—before all hell broke loose.

“Burrito the size of my arm and so delicious; can’t wait to go back for more.” Well said, random online reviewer. Whether technically true or not, accepted local lore is that Tacos Mary’s burritos win the size battle in Chico.

Open daily at 10 a.m.,
closes Mon. at
midnight, Tues.-Sat.
at 2 a.m., Sun. at
1:30 a.m.

Tacos Mary
429 Ivy St.
892-8176

The object of my morning quest was the chorizo-and-egg breakfast version (\$6)—which also is packed with rice, refried beans, cheese, cilantro and onions. And standing alone with my bounty in the taqueria’s barren dining room, a pang of worry shot through me as I considered the logistics of fitting a meal equal in dimensions to a 32-ounce Klean Kanteen into my body. (It isn’t even the biggest on the menu. There’s also a “grande” option for the truly reckless.)

Now, a couple of days later, I can tell you that I did indeed finish the entire creation in one sitting, and I did not eat food again until the following day. The chorizo-and-egg has been on my list of Chico staples for more than 25 years, and it is with a mixture of nostalgia and guilt that I still take advantage of summer student desertion to peacefully indulge in what is, for me, the taste of Chico.

Tacos Mary—or “Tacos de,” as locals who’ve been here since before it changed its name from Tacos de Acapulco in 2012 still call it—isn’t much to look at. It’s basically a lunch counter with a few crummy tables and self-serve soda machine. Sometimes bass-heavy

norteno or ranchera music rumbles through the walls, and always a variety of meats bubble up from steam table pans behind a sneeze guard. The food is that Nor Cal variety of Mexican fare—a combo of taco-truck street meats and iceberg lettuce-and-sour cream-slathered combo plates—served in massive proportions. It’s beautiful and quintessentially Chico.

The breakfast bomb was my third pilgrimage in a week. I’d also ventured in for a carne asada burrito (\$7.99; or \$9.50 for the grande) that was of course enormous and sloppy and stuffed with a generous portion of super-salty yet remarkably tender beef. And before that I was party to a Tuesday-night reunion of current and former locals who enjoyed a variety of combo plates (ranging from \$8 to \$9.50). My pastor tacos were solid, if not remarkable, while the chicken taquitos I stole from my wife’s plate were so impossibly crispy and flavorful they made my eyes roll back in my head.

I do actually appreciate the return of all the young energy to town, and I hope everyone goes nuts and parties often and stumbles into Tacos Mary at 1:30 a.m. to sop up the poison with rice, refried beans and lard. I have made the walk to Student Town for the cure many times myself over the years and will again. But it’s certainly a different, much busier, scene when school is in. No more lazy vibing with Chico ex-pats on an annual “Tacos de” pilgrimage as we moan with pleasure over styrofoam dinner plates. No more peaceful lunches sitting and sweating alone on the curb hunched over a torso-size burrito. No more quiet mornings ordering a day’s worth of calories by myself.

No more summer.

But, of course, even though the break is over, it is still summer for another month or so. And since I left one box unchecked on my menu—for the Tacos Mary Nachos Supreme (\$10.99), which is basically all the good toppings and your choice of meat atop a layer of house-fried tortilla chips in a pile big enough for two—I need to grab a buddy and find a quiet moment in between shifts to properly gorge away the last crumbs of summer. □

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