



A cactus gordita and chile relleno tacos share a plate at Taqueria El Taconazo.  
PHOTO/ALLISON YOUNG

## To the quick

Sparks has changed quite a bit since I was a kid growing up there in the '70s and '80s. The availability of authentic Mexican food was next to nil, so our go-to option for a quick taco or burrito was the Taco Bell on Greenbrae Drive. At 16, I worked through the summer in that kitchen, and my mother loved to stop in for, "Todd's special taco salad," which included pretty much every ingredient in the house. She still gets misty eyed at the memory.

That location closed when the company decided to phase out those iconic "Mission style" brick buildings, but was eventually reborn as Taqueria El Taconazo. It's essentially still a fast food joint—but finally serving the real stuff. The interior is clean and functional. The counter service on my visit was really efficient. And the food, well, Taco Bell it ain't.

The salsa bar has green, red and orange sauces, the heat of which progressed in that order. All three were very good, though I particularly enjoyed the herbaceous, hot red stuff. Most places include a mild, pickled mix of veggies, but the *escabeche* here had cauliflower, carrot, onion and salty cotija cheese swimming together in a fairly spicy marinade. I highly approve.

We tried a couple of *barbacoa* and *cecina* tacos (\$1.29 each); both meats were very tender, packed with flavor and well appointed with cilantro and onion. A *chile relleno* taco (\$1.69) featured a small, cheese-stuffed and battered pepper, topped with lettuce and tomato. Frankly, I think I enjoyed this preparation even more than its larger, plated cousins.

The lightly crisped tortilla pocket of a *nopalitos gordita* (\$2.69) was stuffed with plenty of marinated cactus, lettuce and tomato and might have been the best tasting item overall. If you've never tried seasoned strips of prickly pear, this is a great place for your first taste. A *chicharones gordita verde* (\$2.89) was a lot spicier than expected, which helped distract from the extremely chewy pig skin. I like most of the "exotic" taqueria meats, but this one just wasn't that enjoyable. Best to leave the pork rinds crunchy.

A serving of three chicken enchiladas with rice and refried beans (\$5.89) was a pretty sizeable plate of food. The nicely seasoned meat wasn't dry, and there was just enough sauce to do the trick. The rice was fluffy and tasted pretty good on its own, but I, of course, like mixing it with the beans. These were a bit on the salty side, so the combination evened them out a bit.

I think we've all probably encountered burritos that are long on rice, short on meat. My *carne asada* burrito (\$4.99) was made for meat lovers, with way more steak than any other filling. It was a little over-seasoned, but otherwise grilled just the way I like it. Adding some of the citrusy green salsa made it that much better, though at this point I was so full I had to save most of it for the next day's lunch. I certainly didn't mind a bit. □

### Taqueria El Taconazo

555 Greenbrae Drive, Sparks, 355-3222  
Taqueria El Taconazo is open Sunday through Thursday from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. and from 10 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. on Friday and Saturday.

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