

DISCOVER

# Carnitas: *King of Tacos*

Comparing and contrasting different carnitas dishes is hardly a chore; fatty, crispy, and deliciously pork-y, these “little meats” are my favorite filling for tacos, burritos, sopes, and tamales. As I would discover, the preparations and ingredients used for carnitas vary widely across the Central Coast: some restaurants stay true to the traditional Michoacán recipe with plenty of lard, while others opt for a healthier braise in orange juice or wine. The common thread? Carnitas are universally decadent and always pack a wallop of flavor.

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BY JAIME LEWIS





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**M**y first stop, Taqueria Santa Cruz Express in San Luis Obispo, is a modernist take on the traditional taco shop, with a palette of stainless steel and warm wood, and the comforting banter of soccer commentators from overhead TVs. At the front counter, I met owner Gonzalo Hernandez who shared that his traditional carnitas recipe begins with a secret blend of spices rubbed

Hernandez gave a proprietary smirk and wagged his finger to say, “Not so fast!” Braised in lard over low heat for several hours, the carnitas are then removed from the pot, shredded and fried for a crispy edge before filling tacos and burritos, topped with a subtly spicy chipotle sauce. The result is luscious and savory, with a zesty kick and plenty of chew, especially when wrapped in a warm corn tortilla alongside rice and refried beans. >>



**C**hronic Tacos, also in SLO, is a slicker, more rock 'n roll joint than Taqueria Santa Cruz Express—think Day of the Dead meets Lords of Dogtown—with shiny black tile, red paint and a serious skeleton fetish. The Chronic carnitas are lighter and un-fried. “We marinate the pork roasts for twelve hours in a blend of white wine, garlic, salt and onions,” said employee Maria Vasquez,

after which the meat is braised—along with the marinade—in lard for two to three hours. Once it’s fork-tender, the meat is pulled from the pan, shredded until fluffy, and ready to eat. Vasquez shared that carnitas is the most popular protein at Chronic Tacos, and I can see why, especially when topped with a piquant salsa verde, shredded cheese, cilantro, onions and a squeeze of lime. >>



## DIY DRESSING, TEMPLE-STYLE

The tang and brightness of Taco Temple's creamy cilantro dressing is the perfect foil for the richness of the carnitas beneath—a foil I've attempted to recreate at home to no avail for years. Thankfully, Adam Pollard is an open-book-kind-of-guy. "Blend garlic, lemon juice, Champagne vinegar with salt and pepper. Add a handful of finely chopped cilantro, and then slowly whisk in olive oil," he said. Keep this tasty condiment in the fridge for up to a week and slather it on everything from eggs and sandwiches to nachos.

Whereas Taqueria Santa Cruz and Chronic Tacos are both relatively young establishments (established 2013 and 2015, respectively) Taco Temple in Morro Bay has honed its style over 18 years, and converted plenty of devoted worshipers along the way, including yours truly. Putting out a classic California vibe with surf paintings and longboards affixed to the ceiling, Taco Temple offers what it calls "California fusion" Mexican fare with loads of local vegetables and house sauces that set it apart from the average taco stop. "I hate average," said owner Adam Pollard. "We wanted to spice up

Mexican food with fresh everything—nothing canned or pre-shredded." Along with his wife and business partner, Dawnelle, Pollard developed the Taco Temple carnitas recipe to be healthier, that is, without lard. Each day, he lathers over 100 pounds of bone-in pork butt with achiote paste, orange juice, and spices, then cooks it low and slow overnight. In the morning, the roasts are de-boned and shredded, then fried to order on a flat-top grill and finished with salt and lime juice at the last minute.

What I really respect about Taco Temple

tacos also happens to be the very thing that occasionally triggers complaints: they aren't "authentic." Carnitas tacos, for example, are teetering towers of flavor power served on two corn tortillas with a drizzle of chipotle puree, layered with frisee, shredded carrots, sliced red cabbage, diced tomatoes, and a squiggle of creamy cilantro dressing. In other words, they look—and taste—nothing like a standard taco, but they're my favorite tacos on the Central Coast, hands down. "We get two or three complaints a year that the food isn't authentic," says Pollard. "The other ninety-nine percent love it." **SLO LIFE**