New Orleans welcomes a new festival
TACOS, TEQUILA AND LATIN MUSIC

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Special to The Advocate

The classic Mexican taco is based on a simple concept: Stuff a warm tortilla with savory fillings — top with tasty garnishes. Yet the potential for this ubiquitous, easy-to-eat taco seems endless — and for inventors in the culinary world, that's enticing. So on March 23, local chefs will come together for the city's first Top Taco event, showcasing the wonders of the versatile taco.

Top Taco takes place in the Riverwalk's Spanish Plaza, from 6:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. featuring 40 plus restaurants serving one-of-a-kind tacos and tequila cocktails, competing for awards in four categories:

- Top Creative Taco
- Top Traditional Taco
- Top Creative Cocktail
- Top Margarita

A $25 ticket lets guests sample gourmet tacos, tequila cocktails, and vote for their favorites, with Latin music setting the beat. An $85 ticket grants access at 5:30 p.m., plus exclusive tastings.

Proceeds benefit One Heart Nola, which raises money for foster children and families.

“I think people will be blown away by what some of these chefs create,” said founder Shane Finkelnstein, owner of Nacho Mama's Mexican Grill.

The producer of Top Taco Denver, launched in 2014, helped Finkelnstein build a New Orleans version of their successful summer festival.

The lineup of local restaurants includes Velvet Cactus, RoeRoe, Canal Street Bistro, Blue Oak BBQ, Cuba, Asuka, Dog & Drift, Del Fuego, Bourbon House and Kingfish.

Most restaurants are debuting a special taco dish for the event, Finkelnstein said. In fact, several participating enteries don’t even offer tacos on their standard menus.

“These restaurants are taking it as a challenge to create something that will be delicious,” he said. The innovations are intended to surprise, and the the menu is secret. “I’m excited to see what everybody brings out there,” he said.

Drinks aren’t neglected: Patron, Don Julio and Agavero Orange are among featured tequilas.

Each restaurant is assigned a tequila or spirit and challenged to concoct an intriguing cocktail.

The food and drink groups also will host a tent with a unique theme. For example, Casa Noble tequila, with restaurants Patrons and Jacob's Ladder, will create the atmosphere of an upscale lounge. El Silencio, a mezcal brand, will team up with Johnny Sanchez and Cochon Butcher for a Storyville theme.

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“This is a party where people will not be standing in line, waiting for a drink or a taco,” said Finkelnstein. A panel of official judges — including The New Orleans Advocate’s Ian McNulty — will determine the winners.

Los Pe-Bay Citas, Otto and Marisach Jalicco US are on the music lineup.

Top Taco also features a silent auction that comprises, among many treats, a pair of tickets — along with flights and hotel vouchers — for the Sutton game in London.

The VIP Lounge at the paddles wheeler Creole Queen will host 100 restaurants, desserts and tequila, plus Cuban salsa music from Margie Perez y Marvelo.

Once the fest ends, the fun moves to Taras de for an official after-party.

Finkelnstein said he sees Top Taco as a recurring event that could expand to other cities.

“I think Top Taco is a great concept,” he said. “It’s unlike any event this city has ever seen.”