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Top Taco Festival brings the fiesta

BY JENNIFER GIBSON SCHECTER



The people of New Orleans will not be satisfied until there is a festival for every food on earth within a one-hour drive of Jackson Square. With the inaugural [Top Taco Festival](#), they can walk to one in 10 minutes.

The new festival is slated for Thursday, March 23 at 6:30 p.m. at Riverwalk's Spanish Plaza and early bird discounted tickets are on sale now.

Top Taco began in Denver in 2013 and is now its No. 1 summer food festival. Launching the NOLA version is local restaurateur and philanthropist Shane Finkelstein of [Nacho Mama's](#). The New Orleans iteration will incorporate one of our finest resources, the Mississippi River, into the experience. The location of Spanish Plaza allows for sunset views on the river, and the presenting sponsor, the Paddlewheeler Creole Queen, will participate as the onboard location for VIP lounge.

It's not just about the food in New Orleans. It never is. Leading mixologists in the city will stand alongside their back-of-the-house brethren to compete not for top taco, but for best beverage. Tequilas and spirits available for the competition include 1800 Tequila, Avi6n, Casa Noble, Don Julio, Exotico, Ghost Tequila and Milagro, among others. Participating chefs have been confirmed from Blue Oak BBQ, Bourbon House, Carreta's, Jacques Imo's, Johnny Sanchez, Juan's Flying Burrito, Lucy's Retired Surfer Bar, Mizado, Patois and Superior Grill. All told more than 40 participants will compete in four categories: Top Creative Taco, Top Traditional Taco, Top Creative Cocktail and Top Traditional Margarita.

Live entertainment will be provided by Los Poboycitos and Afro-Cuban jazz and groove band Otra.

Even more restaurants and music will be represented in the VIP lounge aboard the Paddlewheeler Creole Queen. I'm not a big fan of spending extra money on VIP tickets to festivals, but this may be an exception. The VIP offerings include a full open bar, tequila tastings, and exclusive access to culinary dishes from Chiba, Cowbell, Horn's, Midway, Tracey's and Vincent's, as well as desserts from Norma's Bakery and Laurel Street Bakery. VIPs will also see private performances by Mariachi Jalisco US and Margie Perez's Latin band Muevelo.

When in doubt, do it for the children. The Top Taco Festival is a fundraiser for the nonprofit [One Heart NOLA](#). The organization was founded in 2008 by two foster families who recognized the needs of foster children surpassed the support the state agencies could provide. Rallying the help of the local community for those children in transition, the group gained its nonprofit status in 2015. One Heart NOLA continues to be volunteer-run, so 100 percent of the money donated goes to its programming.

Early Bird discounted tickets are limited and available until Feb. 14 or when they run out. General Admission discounted passes are \$50 per person; First Tasting tickets are \$75 and include early entry; and VIP discounted tickets are \$110 per person which includes early entry plus the VIP experience on the Paddlewheeler Creole Queen. You can purchase tickets and learn more at [toptaconola.com](#).