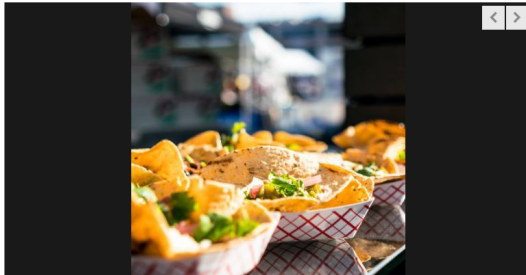


At Top Taco, New Orleans welcomes a new festival with tacos, tequila and Latin music



BY SUZANNE PFEFFERLE TAFUR | Special to The Advocate MAR 15, 2017 - 12:01 PM (0)



Contributed photo from Top Taco
A festival that began in Denver is expanding to New Orleans this spring for the debut Top Taco.



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 innovators 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.

The extravaganza 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 specialty tequila cocktails, competing for awards in four categories: top creative taco, top traditional taco, top creative cocktail and top margarita.

A \$65 ticket lets guests sample gourmet tacos, sip handcrafted cocktails and tequilas, 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 Finkelstein, owner of **Nacho Mama's Mexican Grill**.

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

The lineup of local restaurants includes Velvet Cactus, Bacobar, Canal Street Bistro, Blue Oak BBQ, Chiba, Araña, Drago's, Del Fuego, Bourbon House and Kingfish.

Most restaurants are devising a special taco dish for the event, Finkelstein said. In fact, several participating eateries 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 menu is secret. "I'm excited to see what everybody brings out there," he said.

Drinks aren't neglected: Patrón, 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 Patois and Jacques Imo's, will create the atmosphere of an upscale lounge. El Silencio, a mezcal brand, will team up with Johnny Sánchez and Cochon Butcher for a Storyville theme.

"This is a party where people will not be standing in line, waiting for a drink or a taco," said Finkelstein.

Festgoers and a panel of official judges — including **The New Orleans Advocate's Ian McNulty** — will determine the winners.

Los Po-Boy-Citos, Otra and Mariachi Jalisco US are on the music lineup.

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

The VIP Lounge on the paddlewheeler Creole Queen will host 10 restaurants, desserts and tequila, plus Cuban salsa music from Margie Perez y Muevelo.

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

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

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

Top Taco Festival

WHEN: 6:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. Thursday, March 23

WHERE: Riverwalk's Spanish Plaza

TICKETS: \$65 (\$85 for 5:30 p.m. entry and exclusive tastings; \$125 for VIP experience)

INFO: TopTacoNola.com