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MARIO'S TACO

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Two hours south of San Francisco is Merced. For anyone who doesn't live there, it's a non-descriptive town, located somewhere between here and nowhere, in the San Joaquin Valley of Northern California. Stretching out lazily through a series of repeated clapboard houses and abandoned stores, where the town begins and the city limits end, no one

can tell.

Like so many small towns in California's central valley, named progress has been its enemy. Whereas once motorists stopped on their journey towards Los Angeles or Yosemite, now the super Golden State Highway speeds past taking most tourists with it. In this almost featureless landscape where very little offers respite, the only thing thriving in Merced are the almond groves that line its highways, which in this prolonged season of drought ravish the land like the credit crunch from which this town has never recovered.

Off the Highway along Martin Luther King Jnr Way is Mario's Tacos. This yellow beacon on an otherwise bleak street is easy to spot. It's a lone kiosk opposite the Merced Fairground Speedway, in a parking lot where most of the stores, even the local gun supplier, have gone out of business.

A family business it has survived against good odds the three horseman of the modern age – recession, global brands, and commercial developers; but like most small businesses, competition from the likes of Taco Bell and Wendy's and real estate agents (Mario's is a rented space) are always at its heel.

But survive it does and for one reason only, the food. Once found Mario's Taco is a place that you return to, making an unimaginable detour off the super highway, confident in the knowledge that it serves up some of the best roadside Mexican in the central valley.



Mario's offers classic roadside fare from a menu that never changes. You'll find a line-up of beef enchiladas, shredded beef tostadas, carnitas served with rice, beans and tortillas. For experience, skip the enchiladas and go straight for the burritos. The only deviation is the Medudo – the aromatic traditional soup made from tripe in a red chilli broth – that is available on Saturdays and Sundays.

Orders are taken through a small window and collected from the same. Cash is preferred, although cards are surprising welcome. Meals are eaten on roadside benches under beach umbrellas that threaten to topple if there is a gust of wind.

Unlike many a roadside joint that promises but fails to deliver, Mario's makes no promises. As a result, the food exceeds expectations. A classic shredded beef burrito has all the seasoning of a home-cooked meal. The red rice has

a cleanliness of flavour served with a simple salsa of tomato, onion and cilantro. The tacos are laden with spice and the beans stick to your ribs and stay with you for days.

Mario's will never be included in a "best of" list but it sure does make a great roadside tale.

Mario's Taco Shop

801 Martin Luther King Jr Way, Merced, California

For your own home-styled version of a classic Mario's meal, try pulled pork tortillas with tomato and grilled corn salsa, and guacamole.





Ingredients

Two kilograms of deboned free range pork shoulder

Two tablespoons of Muscovado brown sugar

One tablespoon of salt

One tablespoon of hot paprika

Pre-heat the oven to 200C.

While the oven is heating, combine the brown sugar, paprika and salt to form a rub for the meat, and pat the pork dry. Massage the rub into the entire surface of the pork including the fat.

To roast, place the pork on a wire baking tray and then onto an oven dish. Pour some water into the dish to create a bain marie. This method of cooking has two advantages: the pork remains moist throughout the lengthy cooking process and the fat from the meat is separated from what you will eventually eat. Check the water throughout to ensure that it does not evaporate.

Cook the pork for 30 minutes at 200C before reducing the heat to 125C for five hours.

At the end of the five-and-a-half hours, remove the pork from the oven, wrapping it in foil. Let the pork rest for at least 30 minutes. The result is succulent, flavoursome pork at its best that you can simply separate to achieve pulled pork.

Tomato and grilled corn salsa

Two ears of corn

Some olive oil

Five ripe medium-sized tomatoes

A cup of chopped coriander

Two tablespoons of fresh lime juice

Pinch of finely chopped jalapeño chilli

Brush the ears of corn with some olive oil and place on a hot griddle or BBQ until the corn is tender and slightly blackened. Scrape the kernels from the cob and put to one side removing any fibre from the corn husk. Quarter your tomatoes, de-seed and dice evenly. Combine the corn, tomatoes, cup of coarsely chopped coriander, chilli and lime juice into a bowl. Season with salt.

Guacamole

A quarter of a cup of coriander

One teaspoon of jalapeño chilli

Maldon sea salt

Ripe avocado

One teaspoon of lime juice

Mash the coriander and chilli with half-a-teaspoon of sea salt in a mortar and pestle. Score the avocado and spoon it into a bowl. Gently mix through the paste from the mortar with the avocado.

Season to taste.

Cook your tortillas as directed and assemble for the perfect summer meal.

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