

## AMERICA'S TACO SHOP

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Photography by Richard Maack

**THE VIBE IS HIP, THE SEATS ARE FULL, AND HUNGRY CUSTOMERS LINE UP FOR THE BEST PART OF THIS QUIANT NEW MEXICAN JOINT – THE BEEF.**

Staccato beats of chopping reverberate from the kitchen, often drowning out the up-tempo background music. The vibe is hip, the seats are full and the line of hungry customers snakes through the wood-floored old house from the counter to the door. Am I the only one who notices the thunk, thunk, thunk of a cleaver pounding away behind the tiny window to the kitchen?

It's hard to miss the colorful red-trimmed, mustard-bathed bungalow on the corner of Seventh Street and East Monte Vista Road, and equally hard to forget after a single bite of the signature carne asada. Did I say signature? Heck, it's practically the only dish at the barely 5-month-old America's Taco Shop, another eclectic, independently owned

restaurant that's helping turn that stretch of Seventh into a utopia: indie restaurant row.

The linear focus of America's menu is the beauty of it. Besides the carne asada – available in various incarnations such as a taco, burrito, tostada (called vampiro), quesadilla or torta – there are only two other, albeit tasty, options: a smoky bean and cheese burrito (\$3.25) or a quesadilla vegetariana (\$3.25), stuffed with sublime grilled onions, melted Monterey Jack cheese, lettuce, pico de gallo and a smear of guacamole. Seriously, that's it, not counting a side of simultaneously sweet, tangy and crunchy corn on the cob (\$1.95) rolled in cotija molito (a salty, dry Mexican cheese similar to parmesan) and an unusually thick and creamy flan (\$3.50) – both worth the splurge. Hit the shop on Fridays or Saturdays and revel in another side – fresh ceviche (\$5.95), a mouth-puckering combination of chopped shrimp, diced tomatoes, cucumbers, red onions and serrano chiles served with a basket of chips.

Make no mistake: The reason to come is for the beef. For the explosively flavorful, outrageously tender chopped carne asada. The meat – a choice cut from the belly, where flank and skirt steak are cut – is flash marinated in citrus and spices and grilled on an open-flame gas grill before the hackers mince the meat into minuscule pieces. It doesn't really matter which vehicle delivers the meat – all are outstanding – but I'm especially partial to the burrito. A warm, chewy flour tortilla wraps the carne nirvana with guacamole, pico de gallo and grilled onions, and it's tucked in a paper-lined plastic basket with a couple of hunky cucumber slices, radish wedges and a Mexican lime slice. It doesn't even need the accompanying charred tomato salsa, although, it too, is delicious. The torta is a two-hand kind of sandwich – a hefty toasted bun slathered with mayo and guacamole and piled high with a generous heap of the carne asada topped with lettuce, tomato and pickled jalapeño slices.



Shrimp ceviche (front); carne asada burrito with guacamole (back)

If there is crack in this Mexican Shangri La, it's the service, and frankly, the food teeters so far toward ecstasy that the minor service hiccups are practically a non-issue. That said, you should know that getting a drink is occasionally a hassle, and sometimes food arrives out of order. Chips and fresh-made salsa (\$1.50) delivered after the main meal is maddening, and it happened more than once. The good news is that the food delivery is fairly fast, even when the place is crowded, which is pretty much all the time during peak lunch hours. The sign above the door on the way out reads, "good food... good friends... good times," and despite the service bobbles, I couldn't agree more. And did I mention that it's cheap?

### DETAILS

#### America's Taco Shop

**Cuisine:** Mexican

**Address:** 2041 N. Seventh St., Phoenix

**Phone:** 602-682-5627

**Hours:** 10 a.m. to 8 p.m., Monday through Saturday

**Highlights:** Carne asada burrito (\$5.45); ceviche (\$5.95); flan (\$3.50)



Carne asada torta