

BEST PHOENIX MEXICAN FOOD

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Photos by Sam Nalven

The Rico burrito rojo (smothered in red sauce) and agua de sandia (watermelon juice) at Los Reyes de la Torta in Phoenix

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WE'VE SCOURED THE VALLEY FOR THE MOST MOUTHWATERING MEXICAN FOOD NORTH OF THE BORDER. FROM TEQUILA TO TACOS, TORTAS TO AGUAS FRESCAS, WE'VE STUFFED OURSELVES SILLY TO BRING YOU THE VALLEY'S ULTIMATE GUIDE TO MEXICAN FOOD AND DRINK. HERE'S A SMALL SAMPLE OF OUR DELICIOSO FINDINGS.

Pricing key:
\$=under \$10
\$\$=\$11-\$15

\$\$\$=\$16-\$25

\$\$\$\$=\$26 and over

Top-10 Mexican Restaurants

Their cuisine hails from all parts of Mexico, but one thing unites them: They're the best of the best when it comes to mouthwatering, mind-blowing, tongue-tingling, muy delicioso Mexican food. Here are our top-10 picks for the best Mexican food joints in the Valley.



America Corrales Bortin (right) and Terry Bortin, the husband and wife team behind America's Taco Shop.

America's Taco Shop

The citrus-splashed and flame-grilled carne asada steak from America's Taco Shop is simply the best in the Valley, whether stuffed into a torta, taco or burrito. What began as an asada-only casa now includes a fabulous al pastor (chile- and pineapple-marinated pork loin roasted on a vertical trompo), but vegetarians shouldn't despair. Creamy Peruano beans are a welcome departure from pintos in the bean-and-cheese burrito (splurge for grilled jalapeños, \$.25), and caramelized onions jazz up the vegetarian quesadilla. There's a nice selection of ice-cold Mexican beers, too. Early birds get the scrumptious breakfast burrito with scrambled eggs, potatoes and Schreiner's chorizo and pair it with a cochata, a mixture of iced coffee and house-made horchata. Although we're partial to the original Downtown bungalow with its creaky wooden floors, the other two locations have charm, too, and the same killer carne asada.

Info: 2041 N. Seventh St., Phoenix, 602-682-5627, americastacosshop.net. Other locations: 4447 N.

Seventh Ave., Phoenix; 735 E. University Drive, Tempe.

Hours: 7:30 a.m.-9 p.m. M-Th; 7:30 a.m.-10 p.m. F-Sa; 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Su.

\$

Barrio Café

Ask Chef/owner Silvana Salcido Esparza why Barrio is still so caliente after nine years, and she'll say it's because she only cooks with love. We say it's because of the flavor-popping dishes from Mexico's heartland, served with grace on white linen-covered tables in an artsy setting. Who doesn't love that mural of a Mexican wrestler – a luchador – watching over the tiny bar's broad, deep tequila list?

Fall in love with the chunky guacamole topped with dried cranberries this time of year (and bejeweled pomegranate seeds in winter) and dreamy, creamy queso fundido with poblano and chorizo. Dig into black or spicy red mole enchiladas, but do not – do not – miss the dish that put Barrio on the Valley's dining map since opening in 2002: the succulent achioté- and sour orange-marinated, slow-roasted cochinita pibil (pork).

Info: 2814 N. 16th St., Phoenix, 602-636-0240, barriocafe.com.

Hours: 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Tu-Th; 11 a.m.-10:30 p.m. F; 5 p.m.-10:30 Sa; brunch 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Su; dinner 3 p.m.-9 p.m. Su.

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Carolina's

Carolina's (car-o-LINE-ahs) sets THE standard for flour tortillas. Since 1968, locals and tourists have flocked to the original, bare-bones location in south-central Phoenix for a griddled flour fix. While the hot tortillas are mighty fine straight out of the steam-filled bag, they're equally divine wrapped around a red chile beef burro, or the Oaxaca Special, a zesty mixture of chorizo, roasted potatoes, pinto beans and cheddar and Monterey Jack cheese.

Break out the plastic knife and fork if you smother your burro in the restaurant's cumin-spiced enchilada sauce, and grab extra napkins for the heart-stopping, deep-fried chimichangas. Tacos, tamales and enchiladas also populate the basic Sonoran menu, but choose the rib-sticking burros to experience Carolina's best.

Info: 1202 E. Mohave St., Phoenix, 602-252-1503, carolinasmexicanfood.com. Other locations: 2126 E. Cactus Road, Phoenix; 9030 W. Peoria Ave., Peoria.

Hours: 7 a.m.-7:30 p.m. M-F; 7 a.m.-6 p.m. Sa.

\$



Photos - From left: Inside El Bravo • the machaca burrito, enchilada style, with sides of guacamole and salsa

El Bravo

Bravo to El Bravo for dishing up authentic Sonoran machaca, an air-dried, seasoned beef ground to a near powder and then fried with tomatoes, jalapeños and onions. Other Valley versions are tasty, but they're little more than shredded – albeit juicy – Mexican pot roast. El Bravo serves the real deal as a burro or in an egg scramble. The cheery Sunnyslope gem also steams green chile corn tamales worthy of a trip alone, and their messy plate of huevos rancheros isn't just for breakfast.

Sure, the chips and salsa cost a buck, but you can still fill up for less than \$10. Expect a wallop of flavor from any dish – but don't expect much chile heat. Even the salsas are relatively mild.

Info: 8338 N. Seventh St., Phoenix, 602-943-9753.

Hours: 10 a.m.-8 p.m. M-Th; 10 a.m.-9 p.m. F-Sa.

\$

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