

A little-known Mexican-food chain run by a former Chipotle exec is ranked best in America



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Rubio's Coastal Grill is the David to Chipotle's Goliath.

And David is winning.

Rubio's, a San Diego-born chain founded by a college-aged surfer and made famous for its fish tacos recipe, topped Chipotle to take first place in the Mexican category in a Consumer Reports survey earlier this year.

The Baja California-inspired chain, which serves tacos, burritos, bowls, and other seafood fare, has 163 restaurants scattered on the West Coast. Chipotle, in comparison, has nearly 1,700 locations across the US.

We visited one of Rubio's recently renovated stores in Valejo, California, to see what the buzz is about.



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Rubio's Fresh Mexican Grill tastes better than Chipotle, according to a 2015 Consumer Reports survey.

During a sunny weekday afternoon, we stopped by Rubio's recently renovated Vallejo, California, location.



Here's a photo of a Rubio's location before the brand-wide remodel. The kitschy, beach-themed décor featured thatched roofed umbrellas, surfboards, and laminated bikinis on the wall.



"The brand has grown up," Rubio's president and CEO Marc Simon told Business Insider. The new look on display in Vallejo felt modern and sleek, with natural wood tables, glass bauble lighting fixtures, and blue and green hues to match the chain's ocean-inspired menu.



Marc greeted us at the door. A former principal at Ernst & Young, Simon led the 1998 deal that gave McDonald's a minority stake in Chipotle, which at the time operated just 14 locations in Denver, Colorado. (The Golden Arches later, regrettably, spun off its subsidiary to focus on burger and fries.)



Shortly after the deal, Marc joined Chipotle as regional director, developing key markets including Chicago, Minneapolis, and Wisconsin. One stint at a fast-casual pizzeria later, Marc took the helm at Rubio's, the best-tasting Mexican-food chain in America.



We stepped into the kitchen to see how it's done.



Immediately, the texture, color, and freshness of the ingredients blew us away. Produce comes from the Salinas and Imperial Valleys of California and Yuma, Arizona, whenever possible.



Rich, buttery Hass avocados arrive fresh in Rubio's kitchens so staff can pit, peel, mash, and slice by hand, daily.



The fish is the real star on the plate. "If there is a secret sauce to what we do, it's our knowledge of fish," Marc said. The chain has sourced some of its Mahi Mahi, salmon, tilapia, and shrimp from the same suppliers for decades. Eighty-five percent of the seafood menu comes from certified sustainable fisheries that maintain healthy populations and ecosystems.



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Time to eat! First I ordered the blackened Tilapia Tacos. A sizable, flaky piece of white fish received a light dusting of house-blend seasoning, which took 18 iterations to perfect, according to Marc.



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The cook seared the tilapia on a comal, which a member of the kitchen staff called "Mom's cast-iron pan," at 350-degrees for about three minutes.



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Presented on a warm, stone-ground corn tortilla and topped with creamy chipotle sauce, salsa fresca, and cilantro jalapeño slaw, the taco tasted as flavorful as it was hearty. The slaw packed the heat, while the buttery sauce tamed it.



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Layering textures and flavors is the key to Rubio's success. Next I ordered the Grilled Gourmet Shrimp & Bacon Burrito. The cook sprinkled shredded cheese onto a large tortilla and grilled it upside down, so the cheese hardened into a crisp foundation for toppings.



It's not unusual for a menu item to include multiple sauces, for a variety of flavors. Creamy chipotle sauce and salsa fresca were ladled over a heaping scoop of citrus rice and pan-seared shrimp.



Buttery Hass avocado slices and red tomatillo salsa balanced the heat of the blackened jalapeños, while bacon pieces added a pleasant crunch. Every bite had something new to offer.



The Grilled Gourmet Shrimp & Bacon Burrito was not my cup of tea because the bacon bits tasted over-salted. But I appreciated Rubio's manageable portion sizes, compared to those of Chipotle. While I didn't finish the burrito, I'm sure I could have without feeling super full and gross a half-hour later.



I sampled a few other signature items, like the Balsamic & Roasted Veggie Salad with grilled chicken. Even sans seafood, the salad tasted distinctly like a Rubio's meal. The chicken breast's juicy citrus marinade transported me to the street carts of Baja California, Mexico.



A spritz of lime perfectly complimented the Salsa Verde Shrimp Taco, a savory combination of pan-seared shrimp, salsa verde, buttery Hass avocado slices, three-cheese blend, creamy chipotle sauce, cilantro, onion, and cabbage. The taco tasted too delicious to come in at 154 calories.



I munched on a churro, which was my least favorite item at Rubio's. The fried-dough pastry snapped like a twig when I bit into it, shedding cinnamon-sugar dust into my lap.



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Without question, the Original Fish Taco satisfied me unlike any taco before. Marc said everything on the menu stemmed from this one pedestrian taco – the most popular order and "the hallmark" of the chain.



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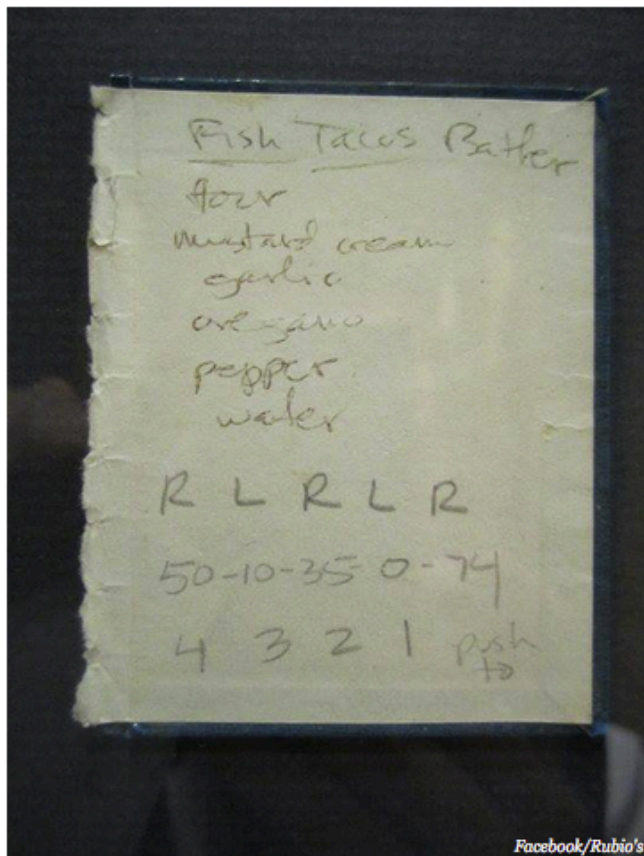
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In 1974, Ralph Rubio, a then-student at San Diego State, traveled with his buddies down to San Felipe, Mexico, in search of good surf. One night, he stumbled on fish tacos at a food cart and fell in love.



The fish taco stand in Baja California, Mexico, pictured here is not the cart Ralph Rubio visited in 1974.

Ralph begged the cook for the recipe, and scribbled the ingredients down on the piece of paper where he kept his bike lock combination. That note hangs on a plaque in the Rubio's headquarters today.



More than 30 years after opening, Rubio's still serves its Original Fish Taco. Let's see how it's made! First, a delicate piece of wild Alaska Pollock, caught in Alaska's ocean waters, was hand-dipped in batter.



Into the fryer it went. Unlike some Mexican-food chains, Rubio's doesn't bury its fish in an inch-thick layer of beer batter.



Topped with mild salsa, fresh cabbage, and a white sauce that Marc says some customers drink by the four-ounce cup, the taco became a thing of beauty.



It was easy to see why the brand's signature item has withstood the test of time. Like Marc said, I didn't have to "fight to find the fish." The Alaska Pollock was the star of the plate, unburdened by excessive batter and bursting with freshness.



I would definitely eat at Rubio's again. In fact, I'd choose it over Chipotle any day of the week. The healthy halo that surrounds the seafood-focused brand draws me in, and the fresh, vibrant ingredients will keep me coming back.



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