

Found: the Best Fish Tacos Ever

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The fried taco at Rubio's. (Photo: Rubio's)

San Diego is known as the unofficial U.S. birthplace of the fish taco, brought here in 1983 by a man named Ralph Rubio, who “discovered” the delicacy in Mexico. Fifteen years ago, when I left my sleepy beach hometown of Encinitas — about 20 miles north of San Diego — for New York City, fish tacos were mostly tasty greasy surfer fare found at local shops.

Now that I’ve moved back, they’re everywhere in the San Diego area, and I’ve been on the lookout for a healthier version of the classic calorie bomb: battered fried pollock slathered in a creamy white sauce and stuffed inside a corn tortilla with crunchy cabbage and *salsa fresca*.

Although I love San Diego's new grown-up foodie scene, I'm not sure I'm a fan of what has happened to the fish taco. Adding tropical fruit salsa or olive tapenade to grilled tilapia? Dude! I'd even seen something called the "surf and turf" — a mix of *carne asada* and grilled shrimp that feels a little wrong. The quintessential Baja street food that usually came dripping in yellow paper is now being served as an \$18 threesome with pressed napkins and sparkly views at the stately La Jolla landmark hotel [La Valencia](#).

Yet as Mexican cuisine goes upscale (a recent charity event at La Valencia featuring [six celebrity chefs](#) served foie gras tacos!), there surely had to be a better batter-free incarnation out there. I'd had my share of flavorless chunks of white fish that forced you to reach for the [Cholula hot sauce](#), the ubiquitous taco topper imported from Jalisco, Mexico.

San Diegans love their fish tacos, and everyone seems to have a different opinion about where to find the best grilled one. (There are some basic rules: No flour tortillas. No lettuce. No ranch dressing.) The funky seaside community of Pacific Beach, north of San Diego, will host the seventh annual "[Best of the Beach Fish Taco Contest](#)" on Oct. 3. [Taco Tuesdays](#) have even become a social institution here. It's the perfect cheap date night or excuse to join your friends for \$3 tacos and buckets of Pacificos at happy-hour prices.

Here's a very unscientific sampling of what I found:

Rubio's Coastal Grill



Rubio's first location in Mission Beach. (Photo: Rubio's)

Ralph Rubio's namesake chain has been synonymous with the fish taco since 1983. That was when Rubio became [inspired on a surfing trip](#) in the Baja town of San Felipe and opened a walk-up taco stand near Mission Bay — an aquatic playground and millennial hangout north of San Diego. Rubio's taco repertoire has grown to include more sophisticated preparations, like blackened tilapia with cilantro jalapeño slaw and garlic marinated salmon. So has his fast-food fish-taco empire, which now includes 200 locations across the west. But the tacos still taste best at the original location.

Related: [No Taco Left Behind in Austin](#)

The Pros: It's a welcome step above most fast-food restaurants and has a fun salsa bar.

The Cons: Despite the beachy décor, there's no forgetting you're not under a Baja *palapa*.

Best For: Decent taco on the run.

The Med at La Valencia Hotel



The Med's executive chef James Montejano. (Photo: Sarah E. Richards)

Who knew fish tacos could be so fancy? The 1926 Spanish-style iconic hotel [La Valencia](#) hotel underwent an [\\$11 million renovation](#) in 2013, spiffing up this salmon-colored “pink lady” in the rich enclave of La Jolla north of San Diego. You can dine on fish tacos on the terrace with sweeping views of gardens, fountains, the La Jolla Cove, and the Pacific. Executive Chef James Montejano serves a tasty grilled version with a signature seasoning blend and artful gourmet touches of watermelon radish and micro cilantro.

The Pros: Resort experience and excellent food.

The Cons: At \$18 for a plate of three, it's pricey.

Best For: Special occasion lunch.

The Taco Stand



Making corn tortillas at the Taco Stand. (Photo: Sarah E. Richards)

On the less fancy side of La Jolla is a taco shop that feels like an authentic *taqueria*. Opened in 2013, the Taco Stand is cramped and chaotic, with lines out the door. But you can watch a cook hand-roll your corn tortillas while you wait for your order and enjoy [Mexican Coke](#) (made with real sugar instead of high fructose corn syrup) and imported Modelo Especial beer. In addition to the grilled *pescado* fish taco, there's a grilled shrimp version. Carb-watchers can order their tacos "protein style" wrapped in romaine leaves instead of tortillas. Don't miss the homemade *churros*.

Related: [Eating Mexican: How to Hold a Taco and Other Things You Didn't Know](#)

The Pros: Great salsa bar with habanero salsa and creamy cilantro and chipotle sauces.

The Cons: Tacos are the small side, and the grilled fish taco is pretty basic.

Best For: Killer hand-made tortillas and a creative salsa bar.

Fish Shop



Fish Shop exterior. (Photo: Sarah E. Richards)

The folks at the Fish House, which opened in 2010, follow the philosophy that if it lives in the ocean, it can be grilled up and served in a tortilla. You can choose mahi mahi, yellowtail, ahi, halibut, red snapper, sea bass, scallops, lobster, or shrimp. Then you select the seasonings (garlic butter is a fave!) and cooking method. The signature dish is the grilled mahi mahi [TKO taco](#) topped with a tropical salsa made of papaya, mango and pineapple. With its dog-friendly open-air seating, the newer Encinitas outpost is a hit with families, while the younger prefers the original location, a few towns down the coast in [Pacific Beach](#).

Related: [Yes, There's a Beach. But When the San Diego Sun Sets That's When the Excitement Begins](#)

The Pros: Solid quality and variety and relaxed outdoor seating.

The Cons: With all those choices (including six kinds of seasonings), this place isn't for purists.

Best For: Fish snobs who know the difference between halibut and snapper.

Brigantine



The author at Brigantine's Taco Tuesday. (Photo: Sarah E. Richards)

With its panoramic views of the [racetrack](#), river, and beach, this seafood chain's Highway 101 Del Mar location is a popular spot. A well-heeled and well-lubricated crowd packs the wraparound decks and patios for Taco Tuesday while munching on Sonoran spiced swordfish tacos and mahi mahi tacos with tangy Mexican slaw and cilantro-lime aioli that are offered at happy hour prices all day long.

The Pros: The views and good grilled tacos.

The Cons: It's crowded and kind of a scene.

Best For: Taco Tuesday with beautiful people and panoramic views.

South Beach Bar and Grill



South Beach's marinated taco. (Photo: South Beach)

This casual beachside fish house a few miles west of San Diego in gritty Ocean Beach has been serving fish tacos since 1992. A favorite for Taco Tuesday, guests pile onto the upstairs outdoor deck for sunset views and a lengthy menu, including albacore, ceviche, shark, lobster, and wahoo tacos, a huge selection of hot sauces, and local craft beers. Their standout taco is the flavorful grilled mahi mahi, which is marinated in pineapple juice and teriyaki sauce, adding a sweet and sour spin.

Related: [The Real A List: Absolute Best Tacos in L.A.](#)

The Pros: Good menu and causal atmosphere.

The Cons: The tacos have been American-ized with mushy flour tortillas.

Best For: Chill vibe and sunset views.

Oscars Mexican Seafood



Smoke fish taco at Oscar's. (Photo: Sarah E. Richards)

The southern Pacific Beach location of Oscar's — on a side street a block from the beach — feels like an old-school taco shop. Opened in 2013 following the success of the original PB shop, Oscar's is hot and packed, and it feels like forever until the cashier screams out your name with your order. But once you find an outside stool, it's all worth it. Oscar's makes a delicious grilled version, but the hands-down most amazing contribution to the world of tacos is the smoked fish version with shredded smoked marlin grilled with cheese and salsa on a corn tortilla and topped with avocado. Try it with mango basil fruit water.

The Pros: The fresh fish and quality ingredients are a sublime combo.

The Cons: No-frills décor and long waits.

Best For: The most amazing version you never knew existed.

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