

The CEO of an obscure Mexican chain reveals his secret to beating Chipotle



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Earlier this year, little-known Rubio's Coastal Grill was named best Mexican-food chain in America.

Consumer Reports polled more than 32,400 subscribers who ranked 65 restaurants, and the consensus was that Rubio's tastes better than Chipotle, Taco Bell, Qdoba Mexican Grill, Baja Fresh, and Moe's Southwest Grill.

When it comes to winning taste, no one knows better than Rubio's CEO, Marc Simon, a 22-year veteran of the retail industry whose résumé includes fast-food juggernauts McDonald's and Chipotle.

We recently spoke with Simon at Rubio's restaurant in Vallejo, California, to find out the brand's secret to success.

The San Diego-born chain, founded more than 30 years ago by a college-aged surfer, serves fish tacos, burritos, bowls, and other seafood fare. It has 163 restaurants on the West Coast, compared to Chipotle's near 1,700 locations across the US.



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"We've been called the Nordstrom of the industry," Simon said.

"Chipotle, because of their volumes, [has] very little interaction with the guest," said Simon, who joined as regional director in 1998, when it had just 14 locations. "It's become a machine. I say that with a great deal of respect because it's well oiled."

These days, eating at Chipotle can feel like walking through a revolving door. Your order is prepared before you in an assembly-line format, ensuring efficiency and a speedy delivery.

"They make a ton of money, and [they] do what they do extraordinarily well," Simon said. "But that's not our model. ... We're not known for being quick."

At Rubio's, you place your order at the register, your meal is prepared in a kitchen, and it takes about seven minutes to arrive. In the fast-casual space, seven minutes can feel like forever.

But according to Simon, quality comes at the cost of time. [Having reviewed an assortment of tacos, burritos, and salads at Rubio's](#), I'd attest that that wait is largely worthwhile.



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Rubio's Original Fish Taco recipe blew me away.

Part of the reason for the delay is that Rubio's deals with seafood, a fickle cuisine that "raises questions" when prepared too quickly, Simon said. Grilled fish makes up 30% of the menu.

When I ordered the Blackened Tilapia Tacos, for example, a cook folded a flaky piece of white fish into a house-blend seasoning before tossing it onto the griddle. It cooked for about three minutes before he transferred it to the toppings counter. If you precooked the tilapia and let it sit out in a clear plastic bucket waiting to be ordered, it wouldn't taste so good.

In March, Chipotle representative Chris Arnold told [Business Insider's Ashley Lutz](#) in March that the brand does not plan to expand into seafood.

Taste buds don't lie.

"There's this argument: Better food wins," Simon said. "The thing we keep coming back to is: Set aside the hype. Focus on the quality of what we're putting in front of our guests."

<http://www.businessinsider.com/rubios-ceo-marc-simon-on-beating-chipotle-2015-8>