



BACKPOCKET BYTES



1ST & MAIN



HOULIHAN'S



FAT TUESDAY'S



WEST DUBUQUE TAP



HOPS & RYE



LOS AZTECAS



FIESTA CANCUN



COPPER KETTLE



YARDARM BAR & GRILL

DUBUQUE'S FISH TACO SCENE

BY BRYCE PARKS

So we went on the hunt for the tastiest fish tacos in Dubuqueland. We didn't know that we were in for a lot more sampling than we thought we would be.

Somewhere in Baja California, sometime in the last 40 or 50 years, someone concocted what is generally considered to be the prototypical fish taco. According to aficionados, this humble delicacy consists of a lightly battered mild white fish that is deep fried, then served in a corn tortilla (often two) with shredded cabbage, a thin sour cream- or mayonnaise-based sauce, a bit of salsa, and a most vital spritzito of lime. Then they went upscale—out of the fryer and onto the grill. These new heart-friendly tacos may be healthier, but they tend to lose their soul along with the fat. Done right, however, grilled fish tacos can taste mighty good, authenticity issues notwithstanding.

But which is best? Even after I finish writing this, I know there will be no consensus because you pesky people with the “freewill” and “personal preferences” will have your own favorites based on your own likes and dislikes. So the best I can hope to do is tell you about each of the ones we tasted and let your fish taco radar guide you to what your brain, heart, and gut tell you is your happy place.

Also, this article is throwing “traditional” to the wind. There is no “this is the way they have been made for a thousand years” bologna, and you can't change traditional. Flavor is flavor, and tasty wins the day. So the rules are out the door, and preconceived notions of fish tacos be damned. We just want goodness.

We were inspired to go on our fish taco tour after featuring the fish tacos at the new Backpocket Bytes in the last issue. We loved them and started comparing them to local venues. So we will begin our tour there.

Located in the Novelty Iron Works building in the Historic Millwork District, Backpack Bytes is only open Friday and Saturday evenings and for lunch Saturday and Sunday, so the availability of these fishy lumps of love are rather limited but worth seeking out. They feature a lightly beer battered cod using their own Gold Coin lager. It lays on a bed of light slaw on either twin corn or single flour street-taco sized tortillas and finished with a very tasty

chipotle crema and Cotija cheese. Cotija is salty, crumbly cheese, sort of like a mild Mexican grated Parmesan with a light flavor. You may have tried it if you've ever had Mexican street corn. The combination is fantastic. A good portion of fish, a zingy sauce that's not too hot, and a slaw that's not too creamy. They come three to an order for \$7.50. What a deal! We wrote about them first because they are likely our favorite.

But favorite fish tacos is like favorite pizza or favorite crab rangoons. Just because you didn't come in first doesn't mean I don't love you too!

Sticking with the fried fish taco theme, we move on down to 1st & Main where their batter fried fish tacos are also simply delish. Fried tilapia (and a decent portion of it) is served with a unique jalapeño slaw and cusabi dressing for \$11. Cusabi is a mix of cucumber, wasabi, and fresh lime, usually mixed with sour cream or mayo. It's light and fresh with zip. You will like it! The tacos come on four tortillas with two to an order. What can I say, deep fried fish is a flavor hard to beat. It's a little bit greasy but a lot a bit yummy. So these aren't diet tacos, buy hey. This isn't a diet taco article.

Heading to Chaplain Schmitt Island next to Q Casino, the fish tacos at Houlihan's are pretty good fried fish tacos as well. Not quite up there with 1st and Main, but we were not disappointed. Their So. Cal Fish Tacos, as they call them, feature panko-breaded North Atlantic cod, chipotle mayo, napa cabbage, honey cumin dressing, and sour cream for \$12.65. So a slightly different kind of fried there with the panko instead of the batter. I guess I'm just a beer batter kind of guy,

Fat Tuesday's and the West Dubuque Tap both have battered fish tacos on the menu. We like both, but we would classify them under the “we have all the stuff here to technically make a fish taco, let's make fish tacos” category. I would call them both good, safe Midwestern versions of a fish taco. No lime crema, cilantro, or cojita cheese here. Using the ingredients on hand to finish off the taco, you get a well-stacked serving of a tasty but not particularly unique flavor.

Up on University Ave., Fat's serving seemed like nacho toppings on a fish taco with black olives, jalapeños, sour cream, and lettuce, finishing off the large flour tortilla and generous piece

of whitefish for about \$5.50. Just west of there on Asbury Rd., West Dubuque Tap features the sweet coleslaw you'll get served as a side to your other favorite Tap meals plus fried cod that people love from the Ginter gals, along with melted cheese, lettuce, and a very mildly flavored Baja sauce. They call it "a fish taco that anyone would like," and we did like it. In other words, "Dad safe." It wasn't fancy or unique, but it was familiar and filling. They are \$4 and only available on Tuesday nights.

I must admit. We've not been to Hops & Rye since COVID hit. On the corner of 11th and Locust St., they're not always open for lunch, but before this went down, we enjoyed their unique fish tacos. The fish was not fried, but the flour tortillas shell was. Fried flour shells are so wonderfully yummy and bad for you. They've changed it up a couple times. It used to be one giant fried shell and more recently it was two medium shells with baked white fish, finished with lettuce, pico de gallo, jack cheddar, and sour cream for \$10. It was kind of like a salad in a delicious fried shell. I would like to have more fish in there and have asked in the past to pay for extra fish. But the flavor is good, and we think you'll enjoy a plate of them out on their nice patio before the weather changes. They're listed under appetizers on the menu, so your conscience could even allow you to eat them and then eat something else too!

One day we had lunch in Asbury at Los Aztecas and Fiesta Cancun back-to-back to try and compare their fish tacos on the same day, so that was fun. Each of these options was a very traditional Mexican preparation with some subtle differences. Both feature a baked white fish on double soft corn tortillas.

Los Aztecas came with cilantro and a side of sauce. The server called it tomatillo sauce, but I thought it was closer to an adobo sauce. Either way, the fish was very bland and the cilantro and sauce were what really provided the flavor in them. Fiesta Cancun's white fish was baked but maybe finished in a pan with some oil because it was more flavorful and came with pico de gallo but no sauce.

In a perfect world, I would have liked Fiesta Cancun's fish tacos with the sauce

from Los Aztecas on the side. I suppose Fiesta Cancun might have a similar sauce I could ask for. Overall though, they were not our favorite fish tacos in the area. That's okay though. I love the carnitas as Los Aztecas enough that it's hard not to just get those every time anyway.

We noticed later that the fish tacos on the menus of the two Los Aztecas locations in Dubuque were not the same. We went to the Asbury location. The Dodge St. location lists tarter sauce as a side along with the tomatillo sauce. Los Aztecas were \$11.99. Fiesta Cancun's dinner was \$10.99, but the lunch version, which we were told was the same, was \$7.99. So, um, we got that! Note that both of these options came with Mexican rice and refried beans on the side.

Our favorite baked fish tacos came from Copper Kettle, out on 30th and Jackson St. Very large while fillets of tilapia were Cajun seasoned and served on a corn-flour mix tortilla with lettuce, pico de gallo, cilantro, pesto, and served with house made tortilla chips and salsa for \$9.95. We just loved how big the fish was, and the flavor was great. It wasn't hidden in a pile of slaw or covered in a sauce to take over the flavor. They have good tasting fish and they know it. Problem is, the seared ahi tuna bowl there is so good too that I'm torn as to which fish dish to get!

The only fish tacos we really didn't care for were at Yardarm on Dubuque's northend. The slaw was too heavily doused with the chipotle mayo sauce, and the fish was too close to fish sticks for our liking. But hey, there are enough very tasty sammiches on their menu for you to worry. Go for one of them instead and you'll be happier. If they put the big fresh shrimp they serve on those skewers in a taco, that would be worth a visit.

So we ate a LOT of fish tacos in the last week or so and I must say, I'm not tired of them at all. I could have them for lunch today and be quite thrilled with the notion. If you've been holding out on the fish taco train, we think it's time you climb aboard. Go for tasty fried love or basked light and healthy and see which fish taco floats your boat.

If we missed a great place, we'd like to hear about it. Please send us a note on Facebook or email info@dubuque365.com. ■

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