



AN ASSORTMENT OF RUSTY TACO'S HANDMADE STREET TACOS

# Rusty Taco

By Bryce Parks

Did we really need another taco restaurant in Dubuque? The answer is, unequivocally... YES!

Rusty Taco is a fast-casual taco concept, inspired by fun and adventure according to, well, Rusty Taco. Each taco is handmade fresh and fast in their open kitchen, using ingredients and sauces prepared on site.

The new venue opened at the end of September next to Natural Grocers along Asbury Road, near the intersection with John F Kennedy Road. You can find it easily by following the line of people out the door waiting patiently to try out Dubuque's newest dining hotspot. We wisely went at about 3 p.m. and got in and out pretty quickly for our first visit.

As the chain promises, the tacos are street-style, not the Americanized hard shell or basic soft shell you find at Taco John's or Taco Bell. In fact, let's just agree to never discuss the three venues in the same breath again. Those franchises are fine, but Rusty Taco is another level of quality and flavors that those fast food options can't compete with.

They have definitely given us something to taco-bout! (Tim: Boo this man. BOO THIS MAN.)

Tacos are the heart and soul of the menu, and there are two taco menus: the main lunch/dinner offerings and a breakfast taco menu, which (praise the taco gods) is available all day!

The handmade street taco menu is diverse, featuring beef served multiple ways, chicken, pork, fish (grilled and fried), shrimp, and vegetarian options. Fourteen total offerings.

Beef tacos include the picadillo taco with spicy ground beef and potatoes, diced onion, and cilantro. The beef fajita taco has skirt steak, fajita veggies, and pico de gallo. Smoked brisket tacos come traditionally with queso fresco, diced onion, and cilantro or BBQ with slaw. And, as close to fast food style as they get would be the Tex-Mex beef, lettuce, tomato, and cheese (safe option).

Pork features include the roasted pork taco with smoked green chile pork, cotija cheese, and pickled red onions. The namesake Rusty Taco has a spicy marinated achiote pork, grilled pineapple relish, diced onion, and cilantro.

Chicken options are pretty straightforward with a fried chicken or fajita-style option.

We LOVE the seafood options, which seem to be lacking around here. Get a grilled or tempura-battered taco with cod, baja sauce, red cabbage, and cilantro. Grilled or fried shrimp tacos are served up "dynamite" or baja-style.

Vegetarians will love the black bean taco with chipotle black beans, pico, cotija cheese, cilantro, and toasted pumpkin seeds; and the unique,



CHIPS AND QUESO

new grilled or crispy cauliflower tacos with avocado crema, slaw, and pickled red onions.

There are also some new specialty tacos you MUST try from the (Not So) Secret Menu. They include an Acapulco-style fish taco; a Philly-style taco, a Green Street taco with a housemate tomatillo sauce and jalapeño ranch; and a migas breakfast taco, which is the ultimate breakfast taco with eggs, chorizo, queso, fried potatoes, tortilla chips, rojo salsa, and fried jalapeños. They have to be tasted to be believed.

The fact that breakfast tacos can be enjoyed all day makes us smile. Served on flour tortillas, (which are wonderfully toasted a bit on the grill) they feature eggs and cheese with a variety of ways to spice it up, including brisket, chorizo sausage, fajita steak, bacon, jalapeño sausage, potatoes, and black beans.

Note that you can also get any taco (breakfast or lunch/dinner) bowl-style without the tortilla and instead served over cilantro-lime rice and black beans or as a salad, either for \$5 more.

You can get chips on the side with salsa, queso, or guacamole. And the guac is GOOD! It starts with hand-squished avocados, followed by fresh tomatoes, onions, jalapeños, lime juice, and seasonings. You can also get sides of black beans or Mexican street corn.

And take those chips up a few nachos by going full nacho with seasoned ground beef, steak, BBQ brisket, or grilled chicken on top of a pile of chips with all the usual fixings.

They even have some kid features, including cheese quesadillas and crispy chicken with tater tots for the hard-to-please, boring food kids in your life!

For desserts, try traditional fried treats like churros or sopapillas.

The prices are on the high end for "fast" food, but it's also a quality product. The tacos range \$3.45-\$4.75 each, and you'll want two, maybe three. Nachos are \$8.75-\$9.75. Despite the length of the line, it moved along pretty well. If you dine in, I'd say to get some chips and salsa, guac, or queso because they give you those immediately, and you can snack away as you await your food. Our orders were slightly incorrect on our two visits so far, but pretty close. (Just little things like forgetting the avocado or forgetting to hold the cilantro.) They're brand new, so we give them a pass. The staff was nice and worked efficiently to serve so many people.

You should really try a margarita since they work so hard to make them from fresh-squeezed limes and "cheap tequila" (their words, not mine!). Get one



for \$6.50 or a literal tower of them to share for \$30. But they also have a nice selection of “fancy beers,” including eight on-tap as well as fountain sodas, Jarritos, and other Mexican colas.

Franchisee Luke Flatin of East Dubuque, IL, who already enjoyed a very successful opening of Sonic on Dodge St. last December, is the man behind the new restaurant offering. The chain itself is named for Rusty Fenton, who, along with his wife, Denise, and partner, Steve Dunn, opened the first Rusty Taco location in Dallas, TX, in 2010.

According to the franchise, “Rusty’s commitment to making everything fresh and by hand still inspires [the brand], but his ‘little taco stand’ is more than just a place to eat and drink. He always wanted it to be a place where everyone would feel welcome. That’s why we make it all with love—from our warm chips to our ice-cold margaritas—so no matter who you are, if you’re hungry, you’re in the right place.”

It is now part of the major dining conglomerate, Inspire Brands, which also owns Buffalo Wild Wings, Arby’s, Dunkin’, Sonic, Jimmy Johns, and Baskin-Robbins.

Flatin bought in because “it is some of the best authentic, street-style food I have ever had.”

We’re sold too! And so is everyone else.

So if you go soon, plan for a bit of a line or try to give it a go during off-peak hours.

Online ordering is not net active for the Dubuque location, so we are sorry, but you cannot yet order ahead and skip the line. We assume the size of the line is the exact reason for that. But when the initial fervor dies down a bit, expect to see that as an option.

Stop in and see what fast food tacos can be like when you add a little love into the recipe. After all, tacos are the most important meal of the day! ■



### Rusty Taco

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WAFFLE



GRILLED CHICKEN AND AVOCADO PANINI

## Kakow Kanteen

By Bryce Parks

When life gives you a year and a half of pandemic drudgery, you don’t give up; you pivot, Ross style (*F.R.I.E.N.D.S.* reference). After COVID contributed to the closing of Marimba, a gyro and shawarma cafe in downtown Dubuque, owner Steve Thompson didn’t close the doors; he instead turned his attention to a popular new beverage concept that is quickly gaining popularity across the country: cacao. His version is spelled Kakow, because it’s spelled like it’s pronounced.

Thompson became interested in the health benefits of cacao, the plant where chocolate comes from. The nutrient-dense drink is high in antioxidants, polyphenols, proteins, and fiber. This can help regulate blood sugar levels and might also contribute to weight loss, which Steve said was his experience with the drink and the reason he wanted to share it with others.

The difference between cacao and the chocolate you get from Hershey’s is vast. While brewing cacao is the end of a two-week process, big chocolate companies speed the process with a soak in an alkaline solution and a fast roast at high temperatures instead of roasting for days in a low heat. So instead of the best thing for you, the most nutrient-dense food in the world when done slowly, big business leached out all the good stuff and pumped it full of refined sugar, making it terrible for you. Steve is going old-school... and delicious, instead.

According to Steve, the cacao naturally makes your body more receptive to insulin, produce more insulin, and stop sugar spikes. So the sugars you do ingest better convert to glycogen in the liver and release slowly all day, reducing cravings and preventing blood sugar spikes.

With a fresh paint job outside and a new focus inside, Kakow Kanteen serves cacao-based beverages and cafe-style lunch and breakfast options. Not surprisingly, Kakow Kanteen’s offerings tilt heavily to cacao-based products including cacao milks, fruit smoothies, and brewed cacao.

“You brew cacao nibs, which are basically chopped-up cacao beans which make a chocolate tea, of sorts,” Steve says. “It’s a subtle mix of chocolate and nuttiness with a floral touch. It’s not quite like anything you’ve tasted before. And if you are a coffee or cocoa lover, it’s way better for you.”

The three styles of brewed cacao Steve is currently serving up (hot to cold) include the Italian, which is thick and

rich and served with two Madeleine cookies. The French includes cinnamon and vanilla, while the Mexican has cinnamon and a dash of chili pepper. We like the hot ones best ourselves. The cacao dissolves best in the heat, and as the cacao itself is dense, it tends to settle, so the last drink is the chocolatiest unless you keep stirring. Oh, darn!

The menu also includes food, of course. For breakfast, Steve will serve up eggs and turkey sausage on croissants or English muffins, as well as different styles of cacao waffles. Lunch features include a fantastic chicken salad croissant and Steve’s signature grilled cheese with swiss cheese and Martha’s Hot Mustard on sourdough. He swears by the blueberries in his grilled chicken and avocado panini, and the unique ham, pear, and swiss is as lovely as it sounds. He also makes a nice Caprese panini. Not your everyday sandwiches for sure, but not your everyday beverages either; so it works well together. Oh, and the mug cake, cacao-based chocolate served fresh and hot. Maybe not for the diet, but definitely for the soul.

He plans to expand with more specialty hot drinks as time goes on, but for starters, he’s staying simple as Dubuque joins him in discovering the hidden magic of the cacao bean.

Visit [facebook.com/kakowkanteendbq](https://www.facebook.com/kakowkanteendbq) for more information and daily specials. ■



### Kakow Kanteen

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