

EL PAISANO GROCERY STORE Y TAQUERIA

BY DANNY FAIRCHILD

If my recent forays into online dating have taught me anything, it is this: Everybody loves tacos. Everybody. Loves. Tacos. In fact, they might be a genuine aphrodisiac. (Sunil, you're a food chemist. Perform some kind of study or something, would you, please?) With so many people lusting—yes lusting—after tacos, it completely baffles me that more people do not get their tacos, burritos, and tortas from El Paisano Grocery Store y Taqueria at 1543 Central Ave. in Dubuque.

What's that? You didn't even know that El Paisano had a kitchen to prepare such goody goods? Well welcome to the cool kids' table. Because now you know. And after this article, you will have NO excuse not to give them a try. And once you do...you'll probably want to get a hold of me. Because they are an aphrodisiac. (The claim that El Paisano tacos have aphrodisiacal properties is the stated opinion of Danny Fairchild and not *365ink*, **Dubuque365.com**, or its staff. There are currently no scientific findings to support Mr. Fairchild's sexy claim.)

Look, I get it. I'm as awkward and committed to staying in my comfort zone as any other painfully white guy. How do I order food there? Is there going to be a language barrier? Is this place really for me? Why am I so awkward? To answer all these questions and more, let me take you on a tour of El Paisano and their cuisine.

I love chorizo. I make my own several times a year (sorry to my friends I shared with last time. I know I used too much salt). My first time to El Paisano was in search of chorizo fodder. I needed some chiles de arbol, which are potent little ruby-colored chiles from Mexico. You think I could find some at your more traditional grocery store? Of course not. Took me five seconds to find them at El Paisano, and I haven't even scratched the surface as far as all the chile pods available. They have just about any you want, including pasilla, cascabel, and guajillo. They're all along the back wall with lots of other spices you didn't know you've been missing. Need some tamarind? I salute your need for tamarind and direct you to El Paisano.

To get to the spices, you do have to pass most of the store's offerings and some of them might make you do a double take. Did you know how many different kinds of mole sauce there are? Yeah? Well did you know you can get a base for at least three different kinds of mole at El Paisano? Now you do.

I've walked past the jar of cueritos (pickled pig skin) many times. Knowing that I would be writing this article, I finally pulled the trigger. I'd say if you're the kind that likes pickled herring and stuff like that, it's worth giving them a try. I'll also say that even though I love pickled herring...I did not like pickled pig skin...but as I said, it was worth giving them a try.

Most of the stuff you're familiar with, however. It's just that some things have additional languages on them, is all. If you like getting sodas made with sugar instead of corn syrup, El Paisano is a good place to go. And while I'm not the kind of jackass who says you MUST get your tortillas at a Mexican grocery store, once you try the tortillas El Paisano stocks and uses in the food they serve...why the hell wouldn't you?

So let's get in to that food.

To look at it, you're not going to be sure that El Paisano actually serves food. There's no place to sit down. You will be carrying out. There's no menu board behind the counter. About the only clues you'll get are other people waiting for their orders, the wonderful aroma, and the little half-sheet menus you can take with you. So you just go up to the counter where you would pay for your Mexican cookies and Jarritos soda? Yup. That's pretty much it. Easy. No language barrier or anything. Sometimes a mom and pop shop like this won't take credit cards. I was worried about that my first time since I never have any cash on me. As long as your purchase is over \$5, no problem. It takes three tacos to get you over the \$5 amount, and those should fill you up nicely.

My taste testing brought me to El Paisano in two phases. Phase 1: Tacos. One of each. Phase 2: Burrito. It had to be done this way, because while I can put it away, I can NOT eat six of those huge tacos plus a burrito the size of my leg all in one sitting.

Phase 1: Tacos.

I already knew from experience that the tacos themselves were good, what with their double-tortilla and as much filling as they can hold, but tacos were a good way to sample all the meat options El Paisano offers. For tacos, they have picadillo (a mix of ground beef, green peppers, potatoes, carrots, and onions), carne asada, al pastor (marinated pork), chicken, barbacoa (steamed beef), and lengua (beef tongue).

I can tell you're already curious about the tongue so I'll cover that, first. I can't count the number of times I've gone to a taqueria hoping to try their lengua only to find that they're out. That's never been an issue with me at El Paisano. You may be groddied out by the thought of eating tongue. But I mean...you already have tongue in your mouth. This is just going one step further, amirite? One of my culinary mottos is, "Just because it's offal, doesn't mean it's awful." I love lengua tacos, even when it's a bit on the chewy side. If you're a stickler for texture, be comforted in knowing that the delicious little cubes of beef tongue at El Paisano are not overly chewy. It's well seasoned and the onions and cilantro toppings give it a lovely brightness.

If you're still in a mood for something different after eating some beef tongue, I highly recommend the picadillo. It's kind of a hash of ground beef and vegetables and a little stock for moisture. It has a consistency almost like refried beans, but if you don't like refried beans, don't let that scare you. The taste is deliciously meaty. I had this on tacos, but I tell you...this stuff is absolutely PERFECT for a burrito. You get your savory meatiness in a medium that helps the other fillings stick together. Like all the other meats available, except lengua, the picadillo is available on a torta (Mexican sandwich). Think Mexican sloppy joe and try not to drool.

All the meats are good, but the one that grabs me most is the chicken. So often chicken is dry enough for its own PBS show. At El Paisano, the chicken is moist and tender and flavored perfectly with a lovely marinated



red color. Fantastic. But you don't have to take my word for it. I shared my chicken taco with Dubuque City Council member Kate Larson and she was immediately reminded of her grandmother's kitchen. Isn't that really all we're looking for when we eat food?

Phase Two: Burrito.

On this particular trip I was reeeally craving that chicken, so I got the chicken burrito instead of the picadillo. I've never been LESS disappointed. Wonderful. The burritos at El Paisano are architectural masterpieces. All the ingredients are not mixed all to hell within the tortilla, but separate. Separate but equal. You have no trouble distinguishing between the layers of beans lettuce, tomatoes, onions and meat and therefore no trouble getting a well balanced bite each and every time. Mixing all your fillings together is delicious and all. I do it at home. But it's also kind of cheating. No cheating at El Paisano.

So let's recap: "How do I order?" You go up to the counter, look at the menu, tell them what you want, pay them, then they give you food. Sound familiar? It should. You've been doing it all your life. "Is there going to be a language barrier?" No. Duh. Shut up. "Is this place really for me?" Well unless Google Translate is lying to me, "El Paisano" means "The Citizen." Hard to have a more inclusive name than that. "Why am I so awkward?" I don't know. Probably because it's so fashionable to be awkward these days.

So there you go. You now have no excuse not to treat yourself to some of the best tacos, burritos, and tortas in town. If you're still only getting those tintinabular tacos that only taste good when drunk...then you need to re-evaluate your entire life. You need to do work on you. I can only help you so much. ■

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Hours: Mon-Sat: 10:30 AM-7:30 PM

Prices: \$2.25-\$5.85

DANNY FAIRCHILD

DANNY DOESN'T TAKE CRAP FROM NOBODY, BUT HE'LL TAKE FOOD FROM ALMOST ANYBODY. IF YOU WANT TO FIGHT DANNY, OR FEED HIM NOM-NOMS, EMAIL HIM AT DINING@DUBUQUE365.COM.

