

FLAVOR



El Tenampa Offers a Taste of Old Mexico

DON'T WANT TO SCARE YOU AWAY, BUT AT SOME point you may feel huffy toward your servers at El Tenampa. They tend to disappear for long stretches of time. Many speak little English. Ask about the ingredients in a beverage called horchata, or inquire what “steamed BBQ” means as defining a birria gordita filling, and expect a blank smile.

Add to that the occasionally undercooked meal – more than once my shrimp quesadilla has been chilly on the inside – and

you might skip this South Orlando spot in favor of Chevy's.

Not me. I'll be back at a booth in this festive little space, my grin as big as a burrito, joyfully indulging in bountiful platters of food just like those served south of the border.

I don't know what buche or posole are, but I've come to trust the folks in El Tenampa's kitchen to plate up a flavorful, authentic take on the often-exotic foods of their homeland.

I stop in for a feast nearly every time I visit the Costco a block away, but for this article I brought along my friend Susie, who grew up in Mexico City. With her insights, a quartet of us ordered Susie's *chilango* (Mexico City resident) favorites so you, in turn, will be able to bypass the American-bred fajitas for a pure ethnic experience, if you're so inclined.

Here's the first draw: Every day, El Tenampa offers a variety of fresh fruit juices, colorfully displayed in clear containers. Point to white for horchata juice (it's made from a nut but tastes like sweet rice), or opt for tamarind, pineapple or whatever else is available



during your visit. Each is freshly squeezed.

From there, it's a fiesta for the palate, nearly always served with corn tortillas, which are handmade on Saturdays and Sundays, machine made the rest of the week.

A few starters are as ample as a meal, and quite the treat. The tacos, at \$1.50 each, are made with two stacked corn tortillas filled with the protein of your choice plus onion, cilantro and a couple of radish slices. Opt for the pastor, with flavorful bits of pork marinated in pineapple juice and seared on a flat grill.

Salted beef is another option. It's dry and, well, salty. Perk it up the way Susie taught us to enliven any dish that's not sufficiently zesty: Ask for a side of homemade salsa verde (green sauce, made from tomatillos) and, using a tortilla chip as a spoon, drizzle on a few robust drops.

Tacos are pedestrian, so if you're feeling adventurous, sample sopes. They're thick, sizzling, pancake-like rounds of corn meal topped with meat (we had shredded pork, called carnitas) or cheese

El Tanampa in south Orlando offers Mexican food and drink at its most authentic, including (left to right): chilaquiles, fresh fruit juices, fajitas and the restaurant's signature El Tenampa Steak topped with grilled raw cactus.

along with salad and a gently crumbled white Mexican cheese.

We found the chorizo sausage savory in the queso fundido, but the cheese – the consistency of melted Swiss – a bit mild. But that's nothing a touch of salsa verde can't cure.

Better yet, the gooey appetizer comes with the restaurant's chunky homemade guacamole and chopped tomatoes and lettuce, which brighten the flavor and add a trio of textures. Alongside are flour tortillas, not corn – just like in Mexico City for this particular dish.

In Mexico City, chilaquiles is a breakfast dish. Thankfully, El



Tenampa will dish it up day or night. A plate overloaded with fried tortilla triangles is doused in that spicy green sauce (or red sauce), then topped with succulent cubes of chicken, melted mozzarella and Oaxaca cheese and crumbled queso fresco cheese.

The presentation is like nachos, but the flavor is sharp, tart and spicy. The tortilla pieces get a bit soggy as the dish sits, but it won't have much time to wilt if you're enticed by spicy/salty/creamy/crunchy flavor.

But how can you limit yourself to chilaquiles when El Tenampa has a spectacular chile rellenos? Such flavors!

The cooks roast and peel large poblano chiles, then stuff them with creamy mozzarella and Oaxaca cheeses, dip the pepper in egg, bread it with flour and deep-fry it. The heat is alluringly challenging, enhanced by an oregano-laced tomato sauce poured on top. But it's tempered by the melted cheese within and crumbled cheese on top – not to mention the standard yellow rice, refried beans, guacamole, lettuce and tomato sharing the plate.

The word “cactus” kept catching our attention on the menu, so we tried it as part of El Tenampa Steak – an undistinguished slab of beef smothered in tomato, avocado, pico del gallo (a spicy,

chunky tomato mixture) and the succulent itself. The cactus is a bit firm, though tender to the bite, similar in texture to cooked okra. The El Tenampa team grills raw cactus every day. The flavor is intriguing.

El Tenampa's cooks make the flan in house, and it's a fitting finish to a Mexican meal. The mound of custard is thick here, just a bit sweet, served in a pool of caramel sauce and topped with whipped cream.

Prices are reasonable throughout. Full dinner platters begin at \$7.99 and, other than a rib-eye steak and a seafood combo, rarely surpass \$11.99.

El Tenampa is adjacent to a Mexican grocery store and decorated in typically cheesy fashion, including a de rigueur hand-painted mural, which doesn't inhibit the enjoyment of the food one bit. However, I do wish they'd shut off the TV, which was blasting a Latino soap opera during this visit. If only I could loan out Susie so you'd have your own guide to the menu.

By the time you read this, El Tenampa might be a door or two over from the address listed below. Owner Edmundo Lutieres plans the move to a bigger space in part to bring in mariachi bands, probably in August. He'll also add a liquor menu, according to his daughter and the restaur-

Colorful and tasty fruit drinks are made fresh at El Tenampa, with such offerings as michelade – made with beer, lime and tomato juice – and, of course, margaritas.

rant's manager, Maria Teresa Gutierrez.

“When my father bought the restaurant a year ago, he kept the name because we're from the part of Mexico known as El Tenampa,” she says. A cousin owns a restaurant of the same name in Kissimmee.

As for Maria, she is happy to serve the foods she loves after eight years as an employee at a Latino-themed chain restaurant. “That concept wasn't authentic,” she says. “At El Tenampa, my father wanted to show the American people what we really are in our culture, in our gastronomy. This is really authentic Mexican food.” ●

EL TENAMPA

WHERE: 11242 S. Orange Blossom Tr., Orlando

WHEN: lunch and dinner daily

HOW MUCH: \$

WHERE TO CALL: 407-850-9499

PHOTOS: RAFAEL TONGOL

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TRÉS BIEN! It's a Révolution Français Engulfing Quaint Winter Park

COME JULY, WINTER PARK MIGHT have its own Bastille Day. Central Florida's all-American city is home to at least nine French eateries, from simple cafés to fine dining establishments – four of them new. *Quelle merveilleuse!*

To celebrate, Tatiana Cerruto, co-owner of Paris Bistro on Park Avenue, hopes to orchestrate a citywide Bastille bash this summer. The event would celebrate Winter Park's burgeoning French connection with an array of Gallic vendors, musicians, artists and events.

You needn't wait until summer to satisfy your cravings for a croissant, onion soup or coq au vin, though. Here's what you'll find within Winter Park's borders *immédiatement*.

The Gutierrezes of Café de France and their classic rack of lamb.



Chez Vincent and Paris Bistro are two Gallic hotspots.

CAFÉ DE FRANCE

Yes, there are some progressive new dishes. But for the most part, this charming little restaurant, which is ringing in its third decade, remains blissfully unchanged. Dominique Gutierrez, who's from Vendée on the Atlantic coast of France, still greets Café de France diners as if they're old friends. At this point, many are. Despite a kitchen staffed with chefs, she still prepares the housemade pâtés the way her mother taught her years ago. Her husband, German, manages the dining room when she's away and selects the wines. Look for classics such as garlicky escargot and au courant entrées such as rack of lamb with mint,



eggplant purée and crisp wild mushrooms.

526 S. Park Ave., 407-647-1869,
lecafedefrance.com

CHEZ VINCENT

Orlandoans have headed to chef Vincent Gagliano's Hannibal Square hideaway for 15 years, dressing up for formal evenings made even more special with trout in lemon-butter and pork tenderloin slathered with Dijon sauce. The intimate space has two sister enterprises: a below-ground wine cellar that hosts private meals for up to 30, and a lounge known as Hannibal's that dishes up American and French favorites.

533 W. New England Ave., 407-599-2929,
chezvincent.com

PARIS BISTRO

Paris Bistro is a restaurant divided: Some seats are tucked away behind Park Avenue's Shops on Park building, past a koi pond. The others beckon along a bustling stretch of sidewalk. Wherever you choose to indulge, you'll find French classics (coq au vin, beef burgundy) plus a slew of daily specials (roasted rack of lamb flambéed with brandy and topped with a porcini mushroom sauce) created by chef and co-owner Sebastian Colce. In addition to the a la carte lunch and dinner options, Paris Bistro offers multicourse, prix-fixe options and a quickie menu for theatergoers.

216 N. Park Ave., 407-671-4424,
parisbistroparkavenue.com



Le Macaron French Pastries offers 16 flavors of pastel cookies.

DYLAN'S DELI

In a disjointed little space featuring warm fresco colors and distinctive touches such as arched doorways, Dylan's Deli offers not only the pastrami sandwiches you'd expect but also a wondrous assortment of French fare. Crêpes and paninis filled with an array of Gallic and international flavors make for satisfying lunches, while montaditos (platters of meats, cheeses, nuts and more) and charcuterie plates pair well with French wines and beers after dark.

1198 N. Orange Ave., 407-622-7578,
dylansdeli.net

CROISSANT GOURMET

Discreetly tucked onto a side street behind simple glass walls, Croissant Gourmet is so small you might not notice it. Seek it out. Under the expert guidance of pastry chef François Cahagne, this simple spot turns out tray after tray of the region's finest croissants and pastries. Quiches are superb here, as are the grilled croque monsieur and madame sandwiches.

120 E. Morse Blvd., 407-622-7753,
croissantgourmet.com

CAFÉ 906

You'll find no stress-free way to reach Café 906, located on the parking-challenged corner of Fairbanks Avenue and Denning Drive. Figure it out. Within this nondescript building is a low-key, friendly little restaurant where French expat Vincent Vallée will brew you a

cappuccino, warm up a slice of quiche Lorraine or indulge you with a peanut-butter filled lava cake – dark chocolate or white. Be sure to try the “salted” pound cake, a savory snack made authentically with goat cheese, walnuts and raisins stirred in, or American-style with pepperoni and pepperjack.

906 W. Fairbanks Ave., 407-975-0600,
cafe906.blogspot.com

LE MACARON FRENCH PASTRIES

In France and New York, specialty bakeries sell macarons – light, sweet little snacks that are perfect during a shopping break. Now Winter Parkers can share the experience. Le Macaron serves up

16 flavors of petite pastel cookies, each made primarily with frothy meringue and ground almonds. The noshes are delicate yet filling, and come in varieties such as black currant, pistachio and chestnut-ginger-chocolate. (Note: These are nothing like similarly named macarons, made with coconut.) Owner and Provence native Rosalie Guillem and her son, Gregory, also offer beverages and other French pastries.

216 N. Park Ave., 321-295-7958

GREEN LEMON CAFÉ

Squeezed in among a row of restaurants in a single Winter Park strip center, this crisp little spot serves up crêpes, paninis, salads and smoothies in a counter-service format.

1945 Aloma Ave., 407-673-0225,
greenlemoncafe.com

SWEET TRADITIONS

After making a success of Paris Gourmet in downtown Winter Garden, proprietors Christine and Stephen Crocher snuggled a second cafe, Sweet Traditions, next door. There you'll find breads, pastries, crêpes, sandwiches and quiches. The fruit tart is an ideal go-to dessert when company's coming.

212 N. Park Ave., 407-622-2232,
sweettraditionsbakery.com ●

François Cahagne of Croissant Gourmet and assorted pastries.

