

## Head to El Faro Plaza in Vernon for the birria, tacos and churros



Birria tacos from Tacos Jaliscience at El Faro Plaza in Vernon. (Ben Mesriow / For The Times)

By **Ben Mesriow**

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**F**ood marketplaces are having a moment on a national — and international — scale. Just look to what's been happening over the last couple of years at Grand Central Market in downtown Los Angeles.

But marketplaces don't need to be new or "revitalized" with artfully branded tenants to be worthy of adulation (i.e. Pike Place Market in Seattle or Chelsea Market in New York City). Los Angeles is home to several decades-old Mexican and Latin American marketplaces and food courts, including El Faro Plaza.

The bustling swap meet in the industrial neighborhood of Vernon is far from the most high-profile of the city's marketplaces, but it has some great food vendors and it could be the most fun.

Wandering aimlessly through the maze-like halls of the market, you may stop to watch a masseuse step up onto a stool and then onto a customer's back; then get a little lost among all the plastic-wrapped Adidas sneakers for sale before stumbling on a food stall or the outdoor food court.

Many of the food vendors serve regional specialties or interesting twists on familiar Mexican dishes, but it helps to go in with at least a shell of a plan. To that end, here are a few of my favorite vendors at El Faro Plaza.

### **Tacos Guadalajara**

Tacos Guadalajara is the most prominent food stall at El Faro Plaza. That's mostly because it has a large banner on the outside fence, facing the herds of 18-wheelers that chug down Alameda Street.

The stated specialty is the *al pastor* (pork cooked on the trompo), but you'll want to try the *tacos de canasta*, or basket tacos. They are folded in half around your choice of filling, then steamed.

The tacos come six to an order and arrive on your plate in a mushy brown heap. They aren't the most beautiful tacos, but you may find yourself wolfing them down, using them almost like Ethiopian *injera* to scoop up salsa and onions.

### **Tacos Jaliscience and Bionicos Jaliscience**

Just across the courtyard from Tacos Guadalajara is Tacos Jaliscience. The main menu is mostly straightforward tacos and quesadillas, available with the standard array of meats. But upon closer inspection, there is, taped in the window, a handwritten sign on white paper advertising the availability of *birria*.

The *birria* tacos are bigger than average and strikingly gamy. The tortillas are a particular highlight, crisped perfectly with just a hint of char but still pliable and sturdy enough to support the tender meat and a healthy dash of salsa and lime.

When you've finished your tacos, walk next door to Bionicos Jaliscience to complete the experience with a bright, peppery *chamango* or *diablito* drink for dessert.

### **Villa Moreliana**

Villa Moreliana is something of a food court legend, with an outpost at El Faro and a long-running and recently upgraded stall at Grand Central Market.

Its specialty is carnitas, and it does them incredibly well, cooking many different cuts of pork in a giant bubbling cazo in the kitchen. Its board lists the cuts offered, and you choose the format in which you'd like to eat them.

If you choose to have your carnitas delivered in a taco, expect so much meat that the taco comes with two extra tortillas on the side for the bits that will inevitably tumble out of both ends as you eat it.

*Costilla* -- rib meat -- is a good, safe choice, but there are plenty of unusual cuts available, from snout to feet and every part of the pig in between.

### **Churros El Güero**

Once you've had your fill of tacos, there's one essential stop on the way out of the market: the Churros El Güero cart, set up in the food court near Tacos Jalisciense.

This is where twists of dough are fried then coated in cinnamon sugar. They come in a white bag, piping hot and about a dozen or so to an order.

The churros are thicker and a little chewier than the cinnamon-flecked puffs of air you may find elsewhere. By the time you get to the car, that white bag will be speckled with spreading translucent spots of grease, and by the time you make it home, there will be mild burns on your tongue, cinnamon sugar on your cheek and an empty bag crumpled on the passenger seat.

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