

THAT'S WRAP

BY NANCY DAVIDSON

With a large Latino population, especially in the Mission District, San Francisco has adopted the burrito as its fast food of choice. With the city's access to the freshest local ingredients, even health-conscious foodies will dig right in to these rice-, avocado-, meat- and salsa-filled tortillas.



THE BURRITOBLOGGER

San Franciscans are crazy about their burritos, but no one is as obsessed as Charles Hodgkins. His mania takes the form of a website (www.burrito eater.com) that charts every "low-brow" burrito joint in the city. Since starting the website in 2003, he has personally reviewed more than 500 burritos at 168 of San Francisco's taquerias. Taquerias serve tacos and quesadillas as well as burritos, but Hodgkins only rates burritos and doesn't include sit-down Mexican restaurants on the site. According to Hodgkins, the traditionally Latino, hip and fashionable Mission District is the place to be for the Mexican-style wraps, but he is quick to point out that good burritos can be found in every neighborhood.

"Burritos are San Francisco's comfort food. All this wonderful stuff and it's wrapped up to go in aluminum foil!" he says. Hodgkins says the San Francisco burrito is much more embellished than those from Southern California, Texas or any other part of the country. Part of the appeal of the San Francisco burrito is the

A CITY LOCAL AND A FEW

SAN FRANCISCO CHEFS SHARE THEIR FAVORITE SPOTS FOR BURRITOS



Papalote photo by Peter Dasilva

bang for the buck: the extremely large slabs (a term Hodgkins coined to describe the hefty one- to two-pound wraps) cost around \$6 each and “fill you up for the rest of the day—and perhaps the rest of the next day.” His ideal burrito is a grilled tortilla with freshly grilled and juicy meat (steak, chicken or pork), saffron rice, beans, cheese, fresh cilantro, spicy salsa and moderately thick guacamole. He prefers his burritos very spicy and without sour cream and considers lettuce an abomination. “Integration [of ingredients] is very important,” he says. “You don’t want a lot of cold bites.” Luckily for burrito eaters, the Mexican-style wraps are made-to-order with your choice of ingredients. Clam chowder in a sourdough bread bowl or dishes from the city’s famous Chinatown are what tourists often include in a typical menu for this city. However, Hodgkins says, “I’d like the burrito to be the food people think of when they think of San Francisco.”

CHEF’S PICKS

Executive Chef Mauro Pando recently returned to San Francisco after a 10-year absence to head the kitchen at Grand Cafe, a classic French brasserie just off Union Square that highlights California ingredients.

During his time away, Pando frequently came back to San Francisco to see his brother. “Every time I flew back, I had to go to a taqueria,” he says. Such is the power of Mexican fast food in the hearts and taste buds of even the most discerning palates in San Francisco.

Pando is just one of many local chefs who enjoys a good burrito. “You can’t get the quality of ingredients and combinations of flavor in other cities,” Pando says. His pick for steak burritos is **Papalote** (www.papalote-sf.com; 415-970-8815). “They put the meat on the grill right then and there when you order. They don’t have any steam tables.” It costs a few dollars more than the typical San Francisco burrito, but to Pando, it’s worth it.

Though taquerias are an integral part of the dining scene, they aren’t usually revered for their ambience. They can be gritty, often painted in garish colors, but almost always frequented by interesting characters, according to Chef Jamie Lauren of Absinthe, a high-profile French-Italian brasserie, known for its updated interpretations of classic cocktails.

Upper Haight Street isn’t Lauren’s usual hang-out neighborhood, but that won’t keep this chef away from **El Balazo**



Chef Jamie Lauren



Chef Alvin San



Chef Steffan Terje



Chef Joseph Manzare

(www.elbalazo.net; 415-864-2140), where she gets her fix of hard-to-find chicken mole burrito.

“The mole has a certain depth from the sweetness of the chocolate, and the chicken is stewed so it falls apart,” she says. “It’s served with really great marinated cabbage salad.”

Lauren usually opts for saffron rice in a whole-wheat tortilla. “I have to get my whole grains when I’m eating my burrito,” she jokes, but the options for whole grain, spinach or tomato-flavored wrappers and vegetarian fillings are part of the wide appeal of burritos.

The food at Roe Restaurant—snapper with stuffed crab meat and celery root purée confit—is a far cry from Mexican fast food. But while Roe’s chef, Alvin San, serves contemporary Southeast Asian cuisine with Japanese influences, there’s no denying the appeal of his favorite burrito.

Off-duty, San heads to **Pancho Villa** (www.panchovillasf.com; 415-864-8840), where there is likely to be a line out the door. His favorite is the carne asada burrito with chile verde sauce from the self-serve salsa bar. The spicy green sauce is made from small green tomatillos, similar to tomatoes but with a slight citrus tang.

Similarly, Chef Steffan Terje has developed a strong following for his seasonal Italian cooking at Perbacco, including simple preparations of raw fish, house-cured meats, risotto and main courses that make the most of the Italian ingredients San Francisco has to offer.

His favorite burrito place for lunch is **Mexico au Parc** (415-495-0409), conveniently located across the street from where he lives, near the calm oasis of South Park. His favorite is carne asada with refried beans, rice, hot salsa, avocado and cilantro, plus El Yucateco green habanero salsa on the side.

Chef Joseph Manzare is also known for Italian specialties. He’s the owner of Zuppa, which serves brick-oven pizza and fresh pastas. At 4am, he sometimes heads to **El Farolito** (415-826-4870), where, most likely, he’ll join other chefs who need to satisfy a late-night burrito craving, proving that when the urge for a burrito hits—at any time—there’s no better place to be than San Francisco. ✈

