



Guadalajara Tourism Board

FOOD & DRINK

On a Hunt for Birria in Its Hometown of Guadalajara

The dish's recent surge in popularity sends one writer searching for its centuries-old roots.

BY CHRIS THARP

March 15, 2022

It's a simple restaurant with ochre walls, ceiling fans, and a tiled floor, lending it the feel of an old ranch house. A shelf above the open kitchen is stacked with clay bowls, and two gargantuan stainless steel pots are perched on the stove. The shuffling rhythms of cumbia pour from the speakers as I lean back in my chair and gaze out onto the Plaza de las 9 Esquinas. While this **Guadalajara** landmark is named for the nine corners the intersecting streets create, it's better known as a hotspot for birria, the slow-stewed delicacy Mexico's second-largest city and surrounding Jalisco state are so famous for.

A horned goat's head on the wall watches over the room like a sentinel, reminding diners what's on the menu. Soon the waiter arrives, delivering a bowl of birria de chivo (goat), along with some warm corn tortillas and a plate of refried beans sprinkled with queso fresco.

I pick up a tortilla and spoon in a nice chunk of the succulent goat meat from the dark sauce it swims in. As I place the little taco in my mouth I'm floored with an array of flavors: smoky chilis, tomato, clove, and even a hint of cinnamon. The goat is so tender it falls apart instantly, releasing a blast of pure umami. This is what I've traveled across an ocean to experience, and I know straight away that the decision was a good one.



“The most important thing for making birria is the clay oven,” says Ivan Ibarra, the head chef at [La Panga del Impostor](#), a hip outdoor seafood restaurant in the city’s Colonia Americana neighborhood. “First you bake the meat before stewing it in the pot with all of the spices. This is how we do it in my hometown of Cocula, where the dish was invented.”

To drive his point home, he’s brought a couple of proper Cocula birrias for us to sample, one made with goat and one from pork. We’re joined by La Panga’s mustachioed co-owner, Javier Rodriguez, who, in between bites, lights up the table with his banter.

I’m struck by how rich the broth is; both dishes deliver more of a spice kick than what I had in 9 Esquinas the night before. The goat is served as rib meat on the bone, and the buttery pork melts in my mouth.

I’ve come to La Panga, however, to check out one of their specialties: birria de almeja. This twist on the classic dish uses a beef broth—but instead of meat, it’s served with a large clam and a couple of fat shrimp.

“My partner comes from Mexicali in the north,” says Javier between sips of Corona. “He wanted to take classic Guadalajara dishes and play with them, so we like to have fun with the menu.”

Soon the clam birria is in front of me, in a small metal bowl. The natural sweetness of the seafood contrasts perfectly with the savory broth. It’s so good I suck on the clam shell in order to get at every last bit of flesh, and I take down the consommé until just a splash remains. A satisfying swig of beer puts an exclamation point on the whole thing.

“For me birria is the perfect morning food for a hangover,” says Ibarra. “I’m happy that it’s getting so popular these days outside of Mexico. This means more people can learn about our culture and cuisine, as well as one of our greatest remedies.”

Where else to get a taste in Guadalajara:

Birrieria La Victoria is one of the city's most acclaimed spots, serving up birria de chivo (goat) and birria de res (beef).

Birrieria Cocula brings birria to the big city in the style of the dish's true hometown, which includes the hard-to-find birria de cerdo (pork).

El Cortijo specializes in mouthwatering birria tacos.

He's right. Birria has enjoyed a surge of prestige over the past few years in the States, so much so that big food sites now have **entire birria guides** to major U.S. cities, and almost every taco truck in cities like **New York** and **Los Angeles** seem to be adding it to their menu. These stateside renditions are often in the form of the quesabirria, where the meat is put into a large taco, fried with cheese, and then dipped in the broth for maximum effect. The website Eater declared birria to be "**America's Hottest Taco Trend of 2020**," and the take-out culture cultivated by the pandemic has only **fueled** this once obscure dish's popularity.

I first discovered birria when living in **L.A.** in the early 2000s. I often saw it advertised on hand-drawn signs in the windows of hole-in-wall Mexican joints, but I didn't know what it was until I grabbed breakfast at a little neighborhood restaurant with a friend who was much more acquainted with the cuisine. He suggested I try it; after one bite I was hooked. I've since sought it out during all of my travels in Mexico, and I've also learned that Ibarra wasn't lying when he proclaimed it a champion hangover cure. I've benefited from its restorative day-after effects many times.

On my final day in Guadalajara I grab my rucksack and head out into the heart of the city's *centro historico*, where the streets bustle with locals walking, laughing, waiting for buses, and hawking sunglasses and fruit drinks. The trumpet squeal and oompah tuba of *banda* music blasts from a hidden doorway, as the aroma of sweet bread mixed with carnitas and tortas ahogadas wafts through the air.



Spread at Birrieria Chololo, Tlaquepaque Guadalajara Tourism Board

I duck into the labyrinthian complex of my final destination, the Mercado Alcalde, and soon find myself in a sprawling food court, where I pull up a stool at [Birrieria David](#).

Little more than a lunch counter, this market stall run by three generations of the Valdiva family is one of the most renowned joints in town. And while it's bare bones and tricky to find, it's well worth the effort of seeking it out.

David II (there are three) offers me a choice of three different cuts of birria de ternero (veal). I settle with carnaza, a humble strip of boneless meat, and he quickly goes to work on it with his cleaver. When he serves it up I notice that there is no broth. This is an unsauced birria meant to be rolled up into tortillas, and using the fresh ones provided, I do just that.

As I take down a succession of glorious self-assembled tacos, I notice a group of young foreigners munching at the far end of the counter. These are the first non-Mexicans I've seen eating this dish, so I'm keen to know what brought them here. Word, it seems, has gotten out.

"Our friend showed us a video of this place on YouTube," says Austin, a [San Francisco](#) resident who declined to share his last name. "And birria is getting pretty popular in California these days."

Jeremy, who hails from Canada and also declined to share his last name, nods in agreement and adds, "It's my first time trying it, and I'm actually blown away by how good it is."

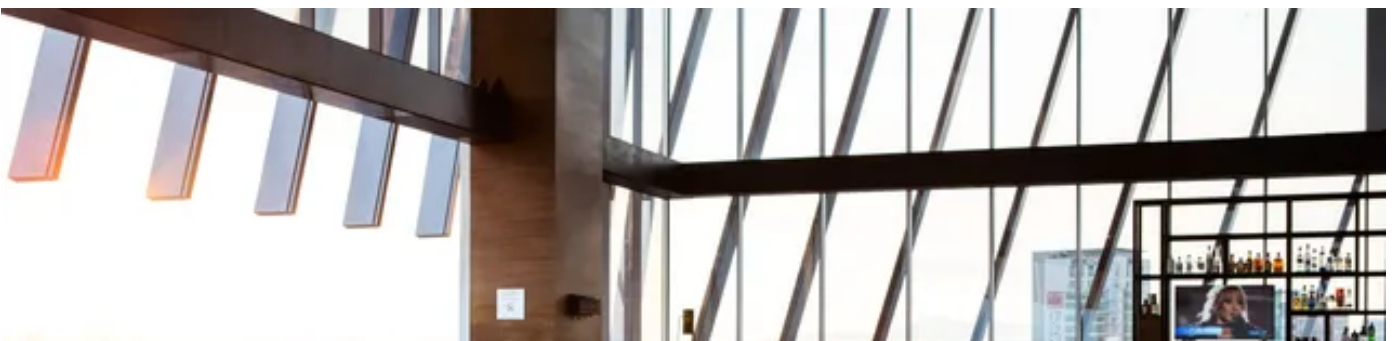
When I glance over to Valdivia and his wife, working away, I can easily see the pride they take in preparing this legendary dish. Most of all, I'm grateful that they're willing to share it with the rest of us.



Quinta Real Guadalajara



Casa Fayette



AC Hotel Guadalajara, Mexico