



DINING OUT

Jazz Tacos

I was prowling the French Quarter one afternoon last August, when a food writer friend called with a tip to check out Jazz Tacos. On the way over, I stopped into a shop and mentioned that I was headed towards Exchange Alley. "There is a great restaurant there," the shopkeeper said. "It's called Jazz Tacos."

Everyone was talking about Jazz Tacos. And why not? The cheery spot, with Mexican soap operas on the television and a smiling if harried Latino staff, served brightly flavored Mexican and Honduran food made to order in the miniature kitchen. Hot *pupusas* were filled with refried beans and crowned with vinegary *curtido* (pickled cabbage and onions). Crisp cubes of *yuca*, a starchy root, were served with *chicharrón* (twice fried pork skins). Slices of sweet, pan-fried plantains were as black as licorice.

I went back a few weeks ago. Mexican soaps were still on the television. The staff was still harried but smiling. The food, however, had changed.

As I waited, a basket of chips and a generic bowl of salsa were plopped on my table—an unwelcome concession to North American taste. When the food arrived, everything was buried under shredded lettuce and cheese. Under the bland blanket, I found signs that I hadn't hallucinated that first good meal. Simple corn tortillas held peppery *ropa vieja* meat that was sprinkled with jalapeños and, unfortunately, covered with lettuce and cheese. I dug out a *pupusa*, which was fresh but leaden without the burst of vinegar from the *curtido*. On my first visit I loved the sweet corn taste of the *tamal* with chicken, but the layer of lettuce and cheese made it taste like everything else on the plate.

Had I gotten the gringo treatment? As I glumly ate, I eyed the tantalizing jar of bright yellow *curtido* behind the counter. It was there, but they decided I didn't want it.

Next time, I made myself clear: no shredded lettuce, just *curtido*. And I got what I wanted. My fresh *pupusa* had that layer of pickled vegetables as bright yellow as a sunflower and spicy enough that I almost sweated on a cool day.

Jazz Tacos still turns out good food, you just have to ask. 307 Exchange Alley, 872-0015. Tue-Thr 10 a.m. - 7 p.m. Fri-Sun 10 a.m. - 8 p.m. Closed Monday.

—Todd A. Price