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## The Find: Taco Asylum in Costa Mesa

Chef Greg Daniels and his partners bring tastes of the world to tacos at Taco Asylum in Orange County.



A lamb taco with ratatouille. (Mariah Tauger / Los Angeles Times)

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By Linda Burum, Special to the Los Angeles Times  
February 17, 2011

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Is there room in Southern California for another hip taco slinger? Judging by the lunch crowds at [Taco Asylum](#), there is indeed.

Like Goldilocks' porridge, the delicious indulgences at this stylized Costa Mesa *taqueria* seem just right — not too edgy, not too authentically greasy and not at all like Taco Bell's. You don't have to hold a taco dripping meat juices while standing

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outside a food truck to consume them, and, if you like, you can legally down them with a craft lager or microbrew IPA.

Don't expect Kogi-like Asian-inflected fusions or modern Mexican cooking à la Rivera and Red O. Each one of the fillings here stays true to a specific culinary culture. The rich braised duck under thin Camembert slices and a crème fraîche topping is totally Gallic. Curried paneer with *raita* and tomato chutney is as distinctly Indian as the smoky grilled baby octopus under a sprinkling of feta and Kalamata olives is Greek.

The kitchen has wisely chosen house-made tortillas made with flour and butter as its delivery system. More neutral than the distinctive flavor of corn, they better complement disparate flavor combinations such as the Provençal-style braised lamb chunks over garlicky ratatouille layered with olive tapenade, or pork belly garnished Vietnamese *banh mi*-style with crunchy-sweet pickled daikon, carrot and a thatch of cilantro.

Chef Greg Daniels, a Southern California native, may be classically trained, but his taste and that of his customers and two partners have clearly been shaped by the culinary bounty close to home: the Levantine food along Brookhurst's Little Arabia, the Vietnamese cooking of Little Saigon, Greek dishes from countless church festivals and restaurants, home-style Mexican fare from Santa Ana and beyond, and Indian and Thai.

These tacos, a mere conceit for delivering high-caliber food in a kicked-back style at modest prices, are as Californian as the Beach Boys, and every item on the menu is just what the

restaurant owners love to eat.

Strictly speaking, the restaurant isn't set up for communal dining with large tables. Yet you see perfect strangers sharing tastes and reporting to one another on their latest discovery as excitedly as children at an amusement park.

It's not all that surprising that Daniels and his partners have tapped so precisely into their customers' sensibilities. They've been honing their style for a year and a half at their first restaurant, Haven Gastropub in Orange, a cozy spot with a full bar for truffled mac 'n' cheese and homemade potato chips served well past bedtime.

Taco Asylum fits seamlessly into the Camp, a retail complex whose back-to-nature theme — set in desert-type flora — includes Cycle Werks for serious bike enthusiasts, Seed natural foods and Bikram yoga. The small indoor-outdoor space with reclaimed wood tables and steel chairs also has a few stools for customers at the ordering counter, like a typical burger stand or old-time luncheonette.

A half-dozen craft beers on tap include Ommegang Belgian-style pale ale and beer blogger's fave Bear Republic Racer 5 IPA. Hop-heads should be pleased with the esoteric canned brews that include Oscar Blue's Brewery Gubna Imperial. And in place of Pepsi or Coke, the house keeps a long list of gourmet sodas, including Maine Root sarsaparilla and Virgil's cream soda.

Daniels puts up proprietary bottled hot sauces, each with a different pepper base: orange-colored cayenne, rust-toned red savina and the ochre-hued Bhut Jolokia, a.k.a. ghost chile — reputedly the hottest pepper on Earth. Any could amp up the Scoville rush on the Corazon taco, a confit of beef heart chunks braised to melting tenderness yet slightly crisped, then topped with pickled baby turnips and an unusually mild Tunisian harissa sauce.



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Chat: Lakers vs. Bobcats - *Lakers Blog* 03/04/2011, 7:38 p.m.

Shall we forgive the copy-cat line at the bottom of the menu that reads, "Changes and modifications politely declined"? Absolutely, because each filling has been so thoughtfully composed and balanced. And with so much variety here, there's a taco for every taste. Why fool with perfection?

## TACO ASYLUM

**LOCATION:** 2937 S. Bristol St., No. B102, Costa Mesa. (in the Camp), (714) 922-6010

**PRICES:** Tacos \$5 to \$6. Beer \$6, sodas \$3.

**BESTSELLERS:** Grilled octopus taco; wild mushroom taco with fried chickpeas and parsley salad; lamb taco with ratatouille; ghost chili pork taco.

**DETAILS:** 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. daily. Most credit cards. Beer and wine. Lot parking.

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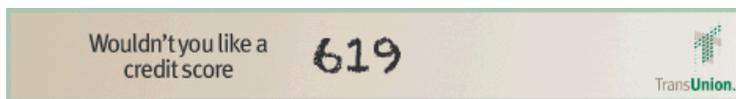
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**modern viking vixen** at 6:25 PM February 22, 2011

I can't wait to try this! I love LOVE LOVE tacos :)

<3mvv

[themodernv.com](http://themodernv.com)

**steve the bug wrecker** at 7:09 PM February 17, 2011

You may all be fawning over Chef Greg Daniels, but I know the man behind the taco. Firstly, he hates animals. I saw him kick a dog one time, right in the ribs. Old people, hates them as well. Back in the day, he offered to walk an old lady across the street, but then pushed her

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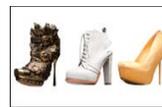


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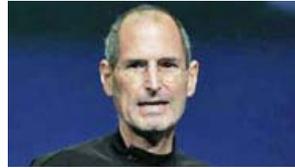
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