At last count, there are 52 Roberto’s Taco Shops across the Las Vegas Valley, which means I don’t really need to type these words. You already know Roberto’s. It wasn’t founded in Las Vegas, but it’s a true Vegas institution—the place you end up eating after a night of hard partying and drinking. From mountains of fries piled with carne asada and guacamole to tree trunk-sized breakfast burritos, this is the spot for late-night or early-morning eats, whether you’re fighting a hangover or pre-venting one. And that’s the way it is because Roberto’s is delicious, and because you’re going to see at least one Roberto’s on the way home, no matter which direction you’re going.

Roberto’s is the single most prevalent source of Mexican food in Las Vegas, even if family restaurants like Lindo Michoacan, Honeys, Ricardo’s and Casa Don Juan (see Page 16) have been around longer. Founder Roberto Robledo, who came to California from central Mexico in 1957 with his wife and seven children, is one of the most influential figures in the business of Mexican food in the region, if not the country. He started with a tortilla factory in 1964, opened his first restaurant in 1968 and launched his first Roberto’s Taco Shop in 1971, eventually expanding to Vegas in 1990. (And yes, all those other San Diego-based taco shops that use the ‘berto’s suffix are spinoffs.) Robledo died in Las Vegas in 1999, and today his son Reynaldo—second youngest among 13 kids—runs all the local shops with his brothers and sisters.

Roberto’s is known for different things, but it really ought to be for its tremendous tacos—slow-cooked beef or chicken shredded into meaty chunks and stuffed into corn tortillas, then fried and stuffed again with cool lettuce and finely shredded cheese. You can get them in a rice-and-beans combo plate, but there’s no need, because the complimentary spicy red and green salsas and escabeche-style hot pickled carrots are all the extra you’ll need. The crunchy, slightly greasy tacos pretty much explode when you bite them, just like the rolled tacos (classic tacos dorados), cylindrical delights piled in a pyramid shape and decorated with fistfuls of guac and cheese. They’re simple, cheap and really good, no matter the time of day, or whether you know the history of hard work behind the food.

Multiple locations, robertostacoshop.com. –Brock Radke

Because it’s headquartered on East Charleston—one street, all the amazing tacos you could ever handle—perhaps Los Tacos doesn’t get the attention it should. Or maybe it’s been around long enough (around 20 years) to be forgotten, even as more authentic “street tacos” have come into culinary fashion. Maybe the name is just too simple. All I know is the tacos at Los Tacos are perfect, occupying the middle ground between the big crunchy stuff and the smaller, double-corn tortilla stuff. Hit the original at Charleston and Spencer (yes, Tacos El Gordo is right there) or check the newer spot on West Sahara (opened in 2010), but come hungry. One $3 taco could be a meal for the lightweight. Warm tortillas are layered with seemingly too many tasty ingredients, starting with cheese that begins to melt once it hits the tortilla, then whole pinto beans, slow-simmered and savory. Choose your meat next, from tender carne asada and carnitas to spicy chorizo to funky lengua. Fresh and pico de gallo, sour cream and guacamole top things off. The warmy sauciness of the beans adds a hearty, burrito-like element to these tacos, a perfect match for chicken, beef or pork but just as satisfying if you go the vegetarian route. It’s a tough choice. 1710 E. Charleston Blvd., 702-471-7447; 4001 W. Sahara Ave., 702-252-0100. –Brock Radke

THE GREATEST LOCAL VERSIONS OF THE MOST IMPORTANT FOOD

THE PILLARS OF TACO VEGAS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEN ESTRADA | ILLUSTRATIONS BY IAN RACOMA
**TACOS EL GORDO**

Tacos El Gordo translates literally to “tacos for the fat one.” That might not make a lot of sense in English, but it’s the real name and conveys the kind of heavy-handedness it has become known for breaking onto the Vegas food scene.

Originating in Tijuana in 1972, Tacos El Gordo first opened stateside in the late ‘90s in San Diego. It didn’t arrive in Nevada until 2006, when it opened a food truck and then a brick-and-mortar original Vegas spot in 2007. Since then, it’s expanded to more than 20 locations across Nevada until 2010, but by my calculations, the second location has been a staple of the local food scene. As at Tacos El Gordo, there are a few rules here you should know upon ordering. Want a burrito or bowl? Always start with the life-altering, trying out new fillings until you find the one that’s right for you—whether that’s the house-made, corn tortilla or the beef, pork or chicken varieties, toppings are half the fun. Experiment until you find the one best for you—whether that’s the basic, crisp, crunchy shell or the soft, warm flour tortilla with a thin layer of sour cream inside half the shell, a simple trick my half-Mexican wife taught me that ensures creamy gringo pleasure in every bite instead of just a few dollops on top.

**KOREM FUSION**

When it comes to tacos, I definitely fall on the side of the traditionalist. But that hasn’t stopped me from devouring some deliciously outside-the-box options, and the latest in that spectrum is Kō-Mex Fusion.

When I first heard of this place, I was skeptical. I mean, what’s so special about Korean fusion and tacos? But after I read about it, I decided to give it a try. I’m glad I did. The tacos were amazing! The flavors were unique and delicious, and I couldn’t stop eating them. I was blown away by how good they were. The service was also great, and the atmosphere was cozy and inviting. I would definitely recommend this place to anyone looking for a new and exciting dining experience.

**TACO Y TACO**

The second location has been a staple of the Las Vegas food scene since it opened three years ago, and it’s been sitting in the Tropicana and Pecos area. Back then, in 2013, opening a taco restaurant wasn’t exactly what everyone expected in the Valley. But now, it’s become a staple of the Vegas food scene. As at Tacos El Gordo, there are a few rules here you should know upon ordering. Want a burrito or bowl? Always start with the life-altering, trying out new fillings until you find the one that’s right for you—whether that’s the house-made, corn tortilla or the beef, pork or chicken varieties, toppings are half the fun. Experiment until you find the one best for you—whether that’s the basic, crisp, crunchy shell or the soft, warm flour tortilla with a thin layer of sour cream inside half the shell, a simple trick my half-Mexican wife taught me that ensures creamy gringo pleasure in every bite instead of just a few dollops on top.

You can typically separate fusion foods into two categories: stuff we love to make at home and stuff we’d rather order in restaurants. The taco is one of the rare dishes that fits into both categories, because it’s so versatile and can be “upgraded” by creative chefs and is simple to make and hard to mess up. Crispy shells straight out of the box, ground beef seasoned beyond recognition, iceberg lettuce and shredded cheese—this meal is prepared at millions of homes across the country every night, as you-know-what as tourists ever since.

When it comes to tacos, I definitely fall on the side of the traditionalist. But that hasn’t stopped me from devouring some deliciously outside-the-box options, and the latest in that spectrum is Kō-Mex Fusion. Mexican food was always part of the family business for Lynda and Tony Yi, but the idea for their fusion restaurant came from螺肉 (laung). The Yis opened Kō-Mex in 2011, and they’ve been serving their brand of Korean fusion to hungry Las Vegas and restaurant lovers ever since.

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Kō-Mex Fusion takes the traditional taco and transforms it into a fusion dish that’s both unique and delicious. The tacos at Kō-Mex Fusion are made with a blend of Korean and Mexican flavors, and the results are truly amazing. The menu is extensive, with a variety of tacos to choose from, and there’s something for everyone. The service is friendly and attentive, and the atmosphere is cozy and inviting. I highly recommend Kō-Mex Fusion to anyone looking for a new and exciting dining experience.
The Cos- $5.50 pork taco you'll ever bite.
salsa molcajete seared no- pales y queso with cactus, Don't miss the fried fish with cabbage, Spanish chef in a half-Chinese restaurant. be made that our best tacos come from a but all the flavors and textures are on than at your neighborhood taco shop, don with oyster), and the prices are higher ence. There are some wild combinations there. The first rule of taco trucks is: You feel like an eight-taco joint to me. Each taco on the menu looks just as colorful as the谈论er better dinner, almost making it too pretty to eat — almost. Adding to the warm and bright atmosphere is Bomb's exceptional service, which makes eating there feel like you're in your average shop. But if you're a first-timer, eat with the first eating mind. Topped with a creamy cilantro lime sauce, cajillas, aioli and pickled onions, it's heaven with any joy, and that pork is so juicy — this feels like no right taco just to me. Who, too many? 200 St. Anthony Blvd., 702-639- 0702. –Brock Dodds

The taco that changed my life isn't really a taco at all — but it didn't have to be. I did know how to make a perfect taco. Mindy, now back as chef at Bomb's Grill in Mandalay Bay, formerly operated by her own Truck 'n' O'Clock truck specializing in Californian-American barbecue meats. The meat was a step above run-off-the-boat stuff, but the final result was very tasty and hearty. The mouth-watering fresh fish, cooped in corn- flakes and cooked in duck fat, was finished with chipotle lime sauce, and it takes with no idea what this is and creamy cheese. It's still one of the best I have ever had, and the story lives on, about this meat.

The tacos at Bomb Tacos are highly satisfying. They come with tortilla chips, pickled onions, and a squeeze of lime. I could getPresenter and former chef at Mundo, Mingo and Olivia’s Latin Cuisine, opened Bomb Tacos earlier this year, and it already has a cult following. Track U Barbeque in Chicago in 1957. 702-262-0141. –Leslie Ventura

Once you enter and see the in-house hand-painted Mexican tiles and stained glass, the service from a staff that's so disciplined, capable and concise in tight spaces, it's like a culinary SCAL team. I haven't seen any other Mexican restaurants do it as well. The service at Bomb Tacos is top-notch, and the food lives up to its name. When the first rule of taco trucks is: You can't make a mistake. Tacos can be a great deal. But there's a new taqueria in town, and its name is far from hyperbole. Robert Solano, the former chef at Mondo, Mingo and Olivia’s Latin Cuisine, opened Bomb Tacos earlier this year, and it already has a cult following. Track U Barbeque in Chicago in 1957. 702-262-0141. –Leslie Ventura

Four months after graduating from college, I was in my first music business-oriented gig at a club on South Beach in Miami Beach. I was there.

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One for one of their “try every taco on East Chapman” iron-stomach excursions, I discovered a lot of hidden gems. I was eating a baleada, a tradi-

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ARTFUL EXPANSION

NOW WITH THREE RESTAURANTS, CASA DON JUAN FOCUSES ON GROWING ITS ORIGINAL DOWNTOWN SPOT

BY LESLIE VENTURA

It was more than 20 years ago when Raul and Maria Gil opened the original Casa Don Juan on Main Street, and it hardly resembled the Frida Kahlo-adorned restaurant locals know and love today.

But before they moved to Las Vegas for a fresh start, the Gils owned a catering truck in California. Their son, Billy Gil (now manager of Casa Don Juan), describes the restaurant’s Vegas beginnings as a humble hole in the wall. The Downtown location was half the size it is today.

A second restaurant near Summerlin has been going strong since 2015, and the Gil family just opened a third Casa Don Juan in Henderson in August. But the real change has yet to happen, Billy Gil says. Downtown’s Casa Don Juan is about to undergo a heavy remodel, adding more than 10,000 square feet and a second story to the already large building. “It’s one of the biggest projects we’ve got planned right now,” he says. Construction is set to begin in late 2017 or early 2018, but the restaurant will remain open throughout—so you can still get your carnitas or shrimp taco fix.

The expansion is all part of Maria’s dream, the one she first had more than two decades ago. “My mom told my dad she wanted a Mexican restaurant, and my dad was like, ‘Okay, I can make that happen,’ ” Billy says. “And then afterward she was like, ‘I don’t want just one Mexican restaurant. I want a chain of restaurants.’ ”

The recipes, like the mojarra al mojo de ajo or tilapia in garlic sauce, evolved over time as Raul and his original chefs—some of whom are still there—experimented with different ingredients. But it’s Maria who can take credit for the Frida theme, which is almost as iconic as the food. “She’s just astonished by [Kahlo’s] accomplishments and how she carried herself as a person, how she expressed herself and the culture of Mexico,” Billy says. “She just adores her.”