

A close-up photograph of a large, round burrito wrapped in a white paper liner. The word "burrito" is written across the center of the tortilla in a dark, charcoal-like font. The tortilla shows signs of being cooked, with some browned spots.

the hunt for the best

Food writer Jan Newberry travels all over California in search of the very best burrito. Plus, secret recipes and readers' favorites from around the West

PHOTOGRAPHS BY THOMAS J. STORY & ANDREA M. GOMÉZ

FOOD STYLING: DAN BECKER



TRUCK STOP For one of San Francisco's best burritos, seek out El Tonayense.

North vs. South

Who makes the best burrito in California? Jan Newberry eats up—and weighs in

BURRITOS, LIKE BARBECUE, are a fiercely defended culinary icon—defined not by what they're made of, but by where they're made. In the North, a burrito is a foil-wrapped behemoth: a tortilla the size of a manhole cover bursting with rice, black beans, meat, and an unending list of ingredients that would empty the shelves of most Latino markets. Buried in a blizzard of guac and sour cream and salsa, it's unrecognizable to partisans of the austere (and rice-free) parcels of refried beans and cheese found in the South. Allegiances run strong.

When Jonathan Gold, *LA Weekly's* food critic, wrote a column last year calling San Francisco-style burritos “monstrous,” claiming that they're filled with things that “neither God nor man ever intended to see the inside of a tortilla,” folks in the Bay Area rushed to their keyboards to defend their own, and a bitter fight ensued. I've stood on both sides of the battleground. I ate my first burrito in Southern California back when oranges still grew in Orange County. The simple wraps were one of the defining foods of my childhood. When I moved to the Bay Area and ordered my first burrito, I thought it was a mistake, a misguided interpretation—a burrito made by someone who had no idea what a burrito was.

I soon realized, I was the misguided one. This log the size of a car muffler (see figure A, at right), with enough calories to fuel a 19-year-old linebacker, was actually a beloved dish. The burritophiles here, I learned, have a religious attachment to their favorite taqueria, and their orders are as predictable as San Francisco's summer fog.

I gave up and switched to tacos.

Lately, though, I began to wonder: Maybe my burrito preference was clouded by sentimentality. Perhaps there was more to these 5-pounders than I realized.

On the road: burritos or bust

So I set off on my own tortilla trail—traveling the state from San Francisco to San Diego—to take a sampling. I start in Oakland

Which type of burrito eater are you?



(fig. a)

NorCal-style:
Hefty weight; lots of extras; definitely rice

----- **OR** -----

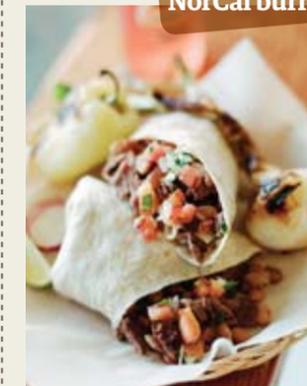


(fig. b)

SoCal-style:
Slender; rice? sacrilege; keep it simple



Jan's favorite NorCal burrito



Burrito De La Calle

SERVES 4, plus 1½ cups salsa for serving **TIME** 2 hours

Adapted from the recipe at La Calle Asadero.

MARINADE

1 tbsp. each vegetable oil, fresh lime juice, minced jalapeño, and minced garlic
½ tsp. each kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
1 lb. flap meat* or skirt steak

SALSA

3 cups finely chopped tomatoes
½ cup minced red onion
3 tbsp. each chopped cilantro and fresh lime juice

1 tbsp. minced serrano chiles
1½ tsp. kosher salt
½ tsp. freshly ground black pepper

ASSEMBLY

4 large (13 in.) flour tortillas, warmed

3 cups warmed canned pinto beans

1. **Make marinade:** Mix all ingredients and pour over meat in a shallow dish. Chill at least 1 hour.

2. **Make salsa:** Combine ingredients in a bowl. Let sit. Stir occasionally.

3. **Grill meat:** Cook over high heat, 8 to 10 minutes. Let rest on a cutting board, covered with foil, 15 minutes. Chop into pieces.

4. **Assemble:** Lay 1 tortilla flat. In the center, dollop ¾ cup beans, ½ cup salsa, and ½ cup meat. Roll. Repeat with remaining ingredients.

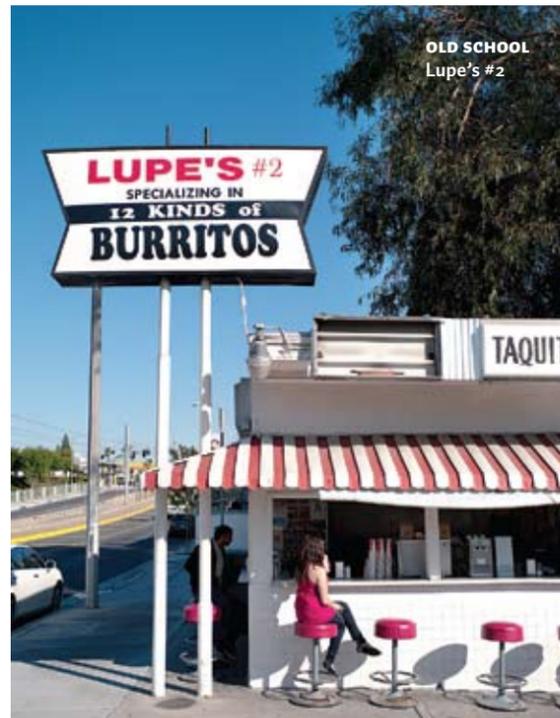
*Buy flap meat (also called flap steak or bavette), a thin, flat piece of beef from the flank area, at Latino markets. —AMY MACHNAK

Burrito rules

| **BE BRAVE** | EVEN IF YOU AREN'T READY TO TRY UNUSUAL CUTS LIKE BRAINS AND TRIPE, THEIR PRESENCE ON A MENU IS A SIGN THAT THE KITCHEN CATERS TO A CLIENTELE WITH TRADITIONAL TASTES. | **EAT IT ON THE SPOT** | A BURRITO IS BEST EATEN AS SOON AS POSSIBLE, ESPECIALLY IF IT'S WRAPPED IN FOIL. THOUGH IT MAY MAKE A BURRITO EASY TO HANDLE, FOIL CAUSES THE TORTILLA TO STEAM AND THE TEXTURE TO BECOME GUMMY.



Pajaro Food Center



OLD SCHOOL
Lupe's #2

at **La Calle Asadero**, a cheery storefront with the good sense not to overwhelm its well-charred chunks of carne asada. Across the Bay Bridge, on a quiet corner in the Mission District, I find juicy al pastor burritos at the **El Tonayense** truck, filled with spit-grilled pork so succulent that I barely even notice the rice.

I head down the coast to Watsonville, where David Kinch, the chef of the Michelin-starred Manresa restaurant, directs me to the **Pajaro Food Center**. The market caters to the immigrants who sustain the Central Valley's agricultural industry, and the taqueria in back specializes in cuts like *cabeza* (head) and *lengua* (tongue). I order a *buche* burrito, thinking it's pork cheeks; later I find out that I had eaten stomach. Still, delicious.

Tastes great, less filling

Down in Anaheim, I hit a joint called **El Patio #2** for a Sunday breakfast of crisp-edged carnitas folded into a tortilla smeared with refried beans that cloud the air with a delicious pork-y fragrance. At **Super Cocina**, in San Diego, I discover burritos *guisado*, filled with homestyle stews like *chile colorado* and dark chicken *mole*. My burrito mind is beginning to expand.

But then I arrive in Los Angeles. Taking a tip from Gold, I drive to **Al & Bea's Mexican Food**, a 44-year-old brick building with bars on the windows and a line that stretches to the street. In place of foil, my burrito is wrapped in yellow waxed paper and propped in a tray. The supple tortilla is dusted with flour, folded loosely around a ladleful of lard-rich refried beans and a toss of grated orange cheese, and streaked with a bliss-inducing green chile sauce.

As I take my first bite, I feel like Proust with his madeleine. A lava flow of beans oozes down my chin, and I'm suddenly back in high school. It becomes clear: Though my heart is in San Francisco, I left my burrito in East L.A.

California's best burritos

NORCAL

El Grullense Grill (1280 El Camino Real, Redwood City; 650/368-3737). On a strip of Redwood City known as Little Michoacán. Great salsa roja.

My order Succulent carne asada.

El Tonayense (3150 24th St., San Francisco; 415/550-9192). Best taco trucks in San Francisco.

My order Juicy, rich al pastor.

La Calle Asadero (1000 Broadway, Oakland; 510/251-1290). Prettiest burrito place I've ever been to.

My order Burrito De La Calle, with refried beans.

Pajaro Food Center (307 Salinas Rd., Watsonville; 831/724-3654).

A Central Valley supermarket stocked with Mexican ingredients.

My order I was brave and went for rare cuts like *cabeza* and *lengua*.

Taqueria y Mercado de Los Amigos (1999 Pescadero Creek Rd., Pescadero; 650/879-0232).

A cult-favorite taqueria tucked inside a gas station.

My order Carne asada.

SOCAL

Al & Bea's Mexican Food (2025 E. First St., Los Angeles; 323/267-8810). Supple tortillas dusted with flour that fit in the palm of my hand.

My order Bean and cheese, and, for nostalgia's sake, an Orange Bang.

Angie's Mexican Restaurant (14346 Pioneer Blvd., Norwalk; 562/863-1277). Family-run with

machaca (shredded beef stew).

My order Subtly spicy chile verde.

El Patio #2 (1001 N. Magnolia Ave., Anaheim; 714/826-0691). The place looks like all the others, but the burritos have extraordinary flavor.

My order The crisp-edged carnitas have a heady pork perfume that knocked me flat.

Lupe's #2 (4642 E. Third St., Los Angeles; 323/266-6881). An L.A. landmark, with 12 kinds of burritos.

My order Green chile and cheese.

Super Cocina (3627 University Ave., San Diego; 619/584-6244).

Only a few miles from the border, with a rotating menu of 16 stews.

My order Chile colorado with cubes of pork in a red chile sauce.



"The supple tortilla is dusted with flour, folded loosely around a ladleful of lard-rich beans"

—JAN NEWBERRY ON AL & BEA'S

Jan's favorite SoCal salsa

Al & Bea's green chile salsa

Our version of their top-secret recipe.

MAKES 2½ cups **TIME** 1 hour

Start by wrapping refried beans and cheese in a tortilla. Then add this salsa to amp it up.

- 4 Roma tomatoes, quartered
- ½ cup finely chopped onion
- 2 tbsp. vegetable oil
- ½ cup chopped canned jalapeños
- 1 tsp. kosher salt

1. Finely chop tomatoes in a food processor.

2. In a saucepan, cook onion in oil over medium heat until softened, 10 minutes. Add remaining ingredients with ½ cup water and cook uncovered over low heat until sauce thickens and lightens in color, 45 minutes. If sauce is still chunky, finely chop it in food processor. —A.M.

BURRITO BLISS
Al & Bea's Mexican Food

Burrito rules

SKIP THE RICE | LESS REALLY IS MORE WHEN IT COMES TO BURRITOS. SOUR CREAM, GUACAMOLE, AND, YES, RICE CAN SERVE AS A COVER-UP FOR LESS-THAN-QUALITY MEATS. GREAT INGREDIENTS SHOULD STAND ON THEIR OWN WITHOUT A LOT OF EMBELLISHMENT. **GO FOR THE GRILL** | LOOK FOR TAQUERIAS THAT GRILL THEIR TORTILLAS RATHER THAN STEAM THEM. THEY'LL HAVE MORE CHARACTER AND A BETTER TEXTURE THAT WAY.



We asked you for your favorite burritos around the West and were deluged with hundreds of emails and posts on Facebook.

ALASKA

ANCHORAGE

Las Margaritas

541 W. Dimond Blvd.; 907/349-4922. The best chile verde, with tender pork—and a true Mexican atmosphere. —CLAUDIA SVIHL, ANCHORAGE

ARIZONA

FLAGSTAFF

The Black Bean Burrito

12 Historic U.S. 66, Ste. 104; 928/779-9905.

These handfuls of heaven are made with the freshest ingredients. The “red hotty salsa” complements meats prepared to perfection. We plan our trip to Flagstaff for maximum Black Bean visits!

—MARK ORDWAY, PHOENIX

PHOENIX

Rito's Mexican Food

907 N. 14th St.; 602/262-9842.

The green chile burrito enchilada-style is the best. The filling is thick and tasty, and the enchilada sauce is well spiced. The line is worth the wait. A favorite of the mayor, policemen, and firemen.

—TOM ROGOS, PHOENIX



TUCSON

Nico's Mexican Food

2965 N. Campbell Ave.; 520/327-3190.

This drive-through has won the *Tucson Weekly's* best burrito for the last five years—with good reason. I love their breakfast burritos, eggs mixed with machaca.

—REBECCA BOREN, VIA EMAIL

CALIFORNIA

BERKELEY

Picante Cocina

1328 Sixth St.; 510/525-3121.

They make their own corn tortillas before the customers' eyes. The Chorizo y Papas burrito is the best! Just enough potatoes to mellow out the spicy sausage. And kid-friendly.

—CHRISTINE GOUGH, OCCIDENTAL, CA



CARDIFF-BY-THE-SEA

Bull Taco

2050 S. Coast Hwy. 101; 760/436-6601.

Service with a smile and a location overlooking a state beach with great surfing! And they are about to open a second location in Oceanside.

Lobster, abalone, and foie gras are a few choices (including the tried-and-true). —ANONYMOUS, VIA EMAIL

REDONDO BEACH

Riviera Mexican Grill

1615 S. Pacific Coast Hwy.; 310/540-2501.

The Works burrito is the best thing in town. This sucker has carne asada and chicken, and I go with the mole sauce—it kicks serious tail with hints of chocolate.

—KYLE DANIELS, VIA EMAIL

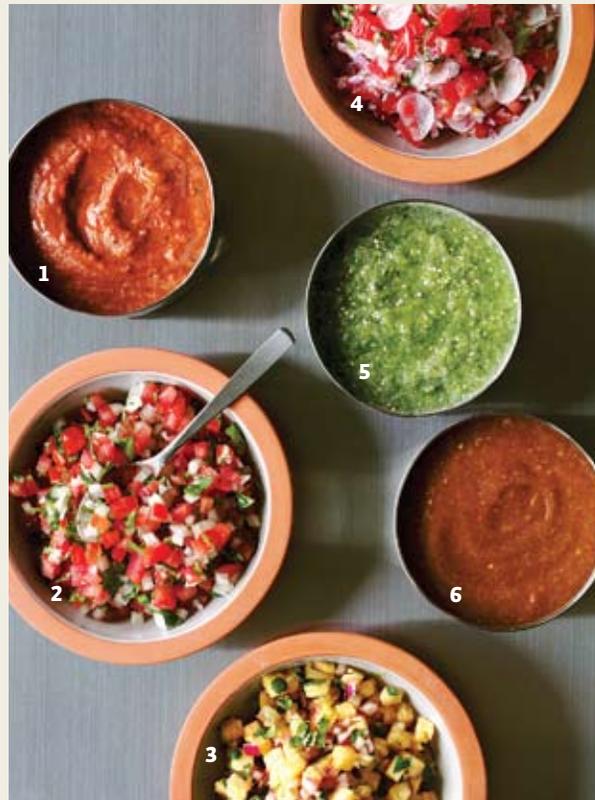


SAN FRANCISCO

La Cumbre Taqueria

515 Valencia St.; 415/863-8205.

I grew up in California. When I get back, usually for a business lunch at a fancy S.F. restaurant, I make time to stop at one burrito joint, usually just before my fancy lunch. La Cumbre in the Mission. Ordering's easy: carne asada with pinto beans. There's nothing froofy here. It's old school. It's perfect. —BILL SHAPIRO, NEW YORK CITY



Making sense of the salsa bar

1. Salsa roja | MILD TO HOT

Hot as a Dog's Nose sauce. Made of tomatoes, red onions, sour orange juice, and habanero or serrano chiles, it's said to be so spicy, it'll warm a dog's snout. Literally “red salsa,” this classic is made with dried red chiles like guajillos, plus garlic, tomatoes, and often chipotles, which give it a slightly smoky flavor.

2. Pico de gallo | MEDIUM HOT

The name means “rooster's beak.” A simple blend of chopped tomatoes, onions, garlic, cilantro, and sometimes jalapeños.

3. Salsa de piña | SPICY & SWEET

A pineapple-based sauce that often includes red onions, vinegar, and fresh chiles.

4. Salsa x-ni-pek | OUCH!

A fiery condiment from the Yucatán, it's sometimes called

Hot as a Dog's Nose sauce. Made of tomatoes, red onions, sour orange juice, and habanero or serrano chiles, it's said to be so spicy, it'll warm a dog's snout.

5. Salsa verde | MILD (MAYBE)

Tomatillos are the base of this green salsa, which often includes onions, garlic, and cilantro. If jalapeños or serranos are added to the mix, expect some heat.

6. Salsa borracha | MILD & SMOKY

Aka drunken salsa, it's made from a base of cooked tomatoes. It gets its kick from jalapeños and its name from the beer that's used to flavor the sauce. —J.N. >96

SAN JOSE**Guadalajara Market**

2830 E. Empire St.; 408/294-0545.
The original “Chipotle”-style burrito ... made to order. This is the real deal!
—MARK MAINE, VIA EMAIL

SANTA BARBARA**El Sitio**

2830 De La Vina St.; 805/682-9747.
After filling the burrito, they put it on the griddle (flat-top) for a minute to brown the tortilla and give it a bit of crunch.
—KENNETH PASTERNAK, VIA EMAIL

COLORADO**DENVER****Chubby’s**

1231 W. 38th Ave.; 303/455-9311.
Smother the bean burrito in green chile ... yum. And don’t forget the chicharrones. —MARTHA MARTINEZ GARCIA, OCEANO, CA

GOLDEN**Tafolino’s Mexican Restaurant**

1901 Youngfield St.; 303/237-3165.
I order a burrito with green chile in every Mexican restaurant. But Tafolino’s Burrito Poblano is better than any I’ve had in New Mexico, Utah, or Colorado.
—TAMMY SHIRK, LITTLETON, CO

LEADVILLE**Manuelita’s Restaurant**

311 Harrison Ave.; 719/486-0292.
This is a tough decision because Leadville has three of THE BEST Mexican restaurants in Colorado. But Manuelita’s stands out. The pork burrito is smothered in green chile; owner Frederico and his family immigrated here from Mexico and started this restaurant from nothing.
—WAYNE PATTON, LEADVILLE

**HAWAII****KAUAI****Red Hot Mama’s**

5-6607 Kuhio Hwy., Wainiha; 808/826-7266.
Red Hot Mama’s is the smallest take-out place you’ve ever seen, but they do a business you wouldn’t believe. Call ahead to order.
—K. AND J. MILLER, YAKIMA, WA

OAHU**Killer Tacos**

66-560 Kamehameha Hwy., Hale’iwa; 808/637-4573.
Not sure if the appeal was the food or because we were in “paradise,” but this burrito in the land of pineapples and shrimp trucks can’t be beat!
—DAWN VOSS, UPLAND, CA

**Kono’s Restaurant**

66250 State 83, Hale’iwa; 808/637-9211.
Their breakfast burritos are amazing, and you can watch surf videos while you eat! —DAN WILDRICK, VIA EMAIL

IDAHO**KETCHUM
Despo’s
Mexican with
Attitude**

211 Fourth St.; 208/726-3068.
It’s been in business for more than 25 years. The all-veggie Richard Burrito is out of this world! I try to save some for later, but it never makes it home alive. Even in these difficult economic times, the owner chooses to make his establishment green: So, no take-away orders to eliminate foam containers. Better yet, families are sitting down to dinner.
—BARBARA DEMBERGH, HAILEY, ID

**NEVADA****INCLINE VILLAGE****T’s Mesquite Rotisserie**

901 Tahoe Blvd.; 775/831-2832.
I love Lake Tahoe, and I love this tri-tip burrito, made with meat from the rotating spit.
—ELAINE SARGENT, RENO

NEW MEXICO**ALBUQUERQUE****Sophia’s Place**

6313 Fourth St. N.W.; 505/345-3935.
They have the BEST breakfast burritos and phenomenal quality of meats. Try the tender pork.
—MILT MCCONNELL, ALBUQUERQUE

CHIMAYÓ**Leona’s**

4 Medina Lane; 505/351-4569.
Down-to-earth and fresh. I wouldn’t go anywhere else.
—VERONICA JARVINEN, VIA EMAIL

OREGON**BEND****Parrilla Grill**

635 N.W. 14th St.; 541/617-9600.

I vote for the Bombay Bomburrito, brushed with ginger banana chutney, and rolled with cilantro lime rice, bamboo shoots, purple cabbage, and a spicy chile curry sauce. —NATALIE FETSCH, BEND

EUGENE**“Lonches” to Go**

901 River Rd.; 541/461-7920.
The setup isn’t fancy, but with burritos this good, it doesn’t need to be.
—ANTHONY ST. CLAIR, EUGENE

PORTLAND**Bonfire Lounge**

2821 S.E. Stark St.; 503/232-3704.
Burritos are only one of many delicious items on this eclectic menu. Homemade mango salsa too.
—CHELSEA CATTO, PORTLAND

¿Por Qué No?

3524 N. Mississippi Ave.; 503/467-4149.
A cheap hole-in-the-wall with local meats; fresh tortillas made all day. I LOVE their avocado dressing/crema combo and their bright green salsa—what’s in it!?
—JODI LEVY, PORTLAND

**SPRINGFIELD****El Taco Express**

647 W. Centennial Blvd.; 541/741-3760.
Try El Super, with meat, a chile relleno, rice, beans, guac, sour cream, and cheese. It weighs in at more than a pound and costs just \$4.50.
—JEFF SHORT, SPRINGFIELD

UTAH**SARATOGA SPRINGS****Café El Lago**

262 E. State Rd. 73; 801/766-9690.
A beautiful space by the Utah Lake.
—RUTH RICHINS, ECHO, UT

**WASHINGTON****PORT TOWNSEND****Bub’s Tacos**

San Juan Ave. at F St.; 360/390-8762.
Don’t just take my word for it—Bub’s was nominated the best new place to eat in Jefferson County.
—BETTY TODD, PORT TOWNSEND

REDMOND**El Toreador**

7845 Leary Way N.E.; 425/883-7570.
I’ve been going here for 25+ years

and have probably eaten 1,000 burritos. I always order the same thing: the pork chile verde burrito.

—JOHN REEVES, REDMOND

SEATTLE**Agua Verde Cafe**

1303 N.E. Boat St.; 206/545-8570.
This place on Portage Bay has an awesome *vegetariano* (sautéed yams, onions, and peppers with rice, pinto beans, spinach, jack cheese, and guacamole). Rent a kayak after lunch. —CHRISTIN STUART JAMIESON, VIA FACEBOOK

**Gorditos**

213 N. 85th St.; 206/706-9352.
The burrito grande takes two or three sittings to finish.
—DAVID PETERSON, VIA FACEBOOK

WALLA WALLA**Tino’s Tacos**

Truck usually at S. Ninth Ave. at Malcolm St.
Try the steak burrito with grilled onions (yum!). Plus, avocado, cilantro, and lime juice. —TERESA AND CHAD GOODALL, POST FALLS, ID

WYOMING**PINEDALE****Rock Rabbit**

23 W. Pine St.; 307/367-2448.
The decor is hippie, but the regulars are generations of ranching families. Come hungry—these are for someone who just hiked the Continental Divide. —MINDI CRABB, PINEDALE, WY

It’s a wrap

We read every letter you sent, and this is what we learned.

Most popular filling:

Carne asada

Most unique filling:

Foie gras

Healthiest filling:

Yams

Most eco-friendly joint:

Despo’s (Ketchum, ID)

Most heartfelt plea:

Someone please open a decent burrito place in Victoria, B.C!