

# Sin City south of the border

## Vegas spices up its dining scene

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Las Vegas offers a broad spectrum of spicy south-of-the-border flavored restaurants. From modern Brazilian steakhouses to traditional Mexican recipes and cuisine inspired by Central and South America, the city has unique takes on tacos, tequila and everything in between.

In particular, Mexican and Brazilian-style restaurants are popping up all over the place. Brazilian churrascaria-style dining is fast becoming a buffet alternative. Upscale Mexican cuisine is also a major player in Las Vegas. Maybe that's because the already thriving Las Vegas party gets a little spicier when you throw in a little guacamole and tequila.

"Mexican food really lends itself to a fiesta. We've always come up with lots of dishes that are good for sharing," says Mary Sue Milliken, co-owner and chef of Border Grill Las Vegas.

### Border Grill Las Vegas

Milliken and her partner, chef and co-owner Susan Feniger, are two hot tamales that have exceeded culinary expectations and transformed traditional Mexican recipes into upscale comfort foods.

When Milliken and Feniger were in the beginning stages of conceptualizing Border Grill back in the early 1980s, they were admitted novices in Mexican cuisine.

"We had never heard of a chipotle chile. We were on a trip in '84 and we met our first chipotle chile and fell totally in love. We came back, went to our produce company, met at 5 a.m. and went to all the produce sellers until we found it," explains Milliken.

Milliken also adds she and Feniger were inspired by little taco stands and the fresh vegetables incorporated into

authentic Mexican cuisine. They've come a long way from taco stands -- Milliken and Feniger now have a two-story restaurant in Las Vegas overlooking the Mandalay Bay pool area.

Border Grill is also environmentally conscious. The restaurant uses sustainable food only, and confers with the Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch Program.

In addition to being environmentally aware, Border Grill is also health conscious. Their "good for the planet, good for you" program gives guests the opportunity to eat more vegetables and less meat, in a ratio of 80 percent vegetables to 20 percent meat.

"I'm really proud of our efforts to constantly upgrade our ingredient quality and find only the best. We find only the kind of food that we would want to serve only to our families," says Milliken.

### T&T (Tacos & Tequila)

Tacos & Tequila is a casual Mexican dining restaurant on the second story of the Luxor. Chef Saul Ortiz creates authentic recipes from his native Mexico like mole and fresh lump crab tostadas.

The interior features rock music, dancing skeletons, a colorful palette of yellows, reds, greens oranges and blues and a full-on bullfighting arena feel.

T&T offers a trio of modernized quesadillas including the adobo shrimp with Oaxaca cheese and chile chipotle. Unique tacos include the Mediterraneo, a taco filled with falafel, tahini, tomato and green bell pepper, mint, lettuce and tamarind pico de gallo.

T & T is a great place to go to keep the fun going and the tequila flowing.

### Mesa Grill

Mesa Grill at Caesars Palace has a young, modern vibe and fresh takes on

Southwestern-style food. Grill-master Bobby Flay's unique cooking style is loaded with flavor and authentic Mexican ingredients. Even the equipment is impressive, including a 20-foot high rotisserie grill soaring above the dining room.

The cuisine includes signature items like a blue corn pancake with barbecued duck and habañero chile sauce and the coffee spice-rubbed rotisserie filet mignon with wild mushroom-ancho chile sauce and green chile corn pudding. The careful attention to detail and bold flavors will make you want to scrape every morsel off your plate.

Mesa Grill's dessert program is also noteworthy. Consulting Pastry Chef Vicky Wells seasonally updates the pastry menu with delights like apple cider cake and a sinful chocolate espresso layer cake with toffee sauce, Kahlua toffee pieces and rich espresso butter cream.

### Pampas Brazilian Grille

Pampas Brazilian Grille at Planet Hollywood is not your average restaurant. On any given night, 11 meats on long swords are served by Passadors dancing around with the likes of chicken, beef and pork.

The finest cuts of meat are prepared with traditional Brazilian spices and spit-roasted over a brick oven to perfection. Meat selections include picanha (noble sirloin), which is typically the most popular cut. There is also a chicken skewer that comes to your table, perfectly seasoned with hints of a secret blend of Brazilian spices, rock salt, and red and yellow peppers.

### Dos Caminos

Dos Caminos in the Palazzo combines an edgy, funky ambience (complete with an entire wall made of skulls) with tasty Mexican food including fresh made guacamole and smoked chile croutons



Courtesy Border Grill

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on salads.

In addition to the food, there are lots of drinks at Dos Caminos. Consider that the other camino, if you will.

Margaritas include El Camino, which is made with Milagro Bianco, triple sec and hand squeezed lime juice and a blueberry pomegranate margarita, made with Partida Bianco, blueberry pomegranate and fresh lime.

No margarita is complete without tequila and Dos Caminos offers tequila flights, a sampling of three different tequilas served with chile salt, sangrita (a blended beverage made of tomatoes, orange, lemon and lime juice) and lime.

### Texas de Brazil

Texas de Brazil is constantly buzzing. Located in Town Square shopping center, the restaurant is busy throughout the lunch and dinner hours.

Maybe that's because Texas de Brazil's service, quality, and cuisine are done right. With 15 other locations in the United States, Texas de Brazil has had plenty of time to practice for its premiere Vegas location.

"It's the kind of service and the concept that we have," says Culinary Director Evandro Caregnato.

The restaurant's layout is half buffet, half table service. The 50-item salad bar is served buffet style, for you to raid at your leisure. The meats like chicken, lamb, venison, filet mignon and pork tenderloin are cooked using traditional charcoal methods and delivered tableside.

"The gauchos are the same people that are going to be preparing the meat, cooking the meat and serving the meat. We found that when we have somebody working from the beginning to the end, they are going to put much more passion into what they're doing," explains Caregnato.

The food is not the only thing imported from Brazil. Some of the staff are native Brazilians, including Caregnato.

"One of my biggest contributions to the company is to ensure everything we do in the United States is going to be very authentic the way we do it in South Brazil," he said.

Whether you're searching for Mexican-style comfort food like Border Grill's, a trendy atmosphere like Dos Caminos, or casual authenticity like Texas de Brazil and Pampas Brazilian Grille, Las Vegas offers the finest cuisine right here, no passport needed.