



San Julian Taco and Tequila

Cape Town's hidden
Mexican gem

JANET SWART braves the Cape
winter in search of an authentic
taste of Mexico

Images: JANET SWART

Since going to America a few years ago and discovering the joy that is Mexican food, I've searched in vain for something authentic and similar in Cape Town. For the most part, all you get is cheese, beans, a little bit of vinegary guacamole, and more cheese: the dreaded "Tex Mex" masquerading as Mexican. So when I heard about San Julian Taco and Tequila, an apparently authentic Mexican restaurant in the CBD, I wasn't that all that hopeful. But the name kept coming up in magazines and blogs, and eventually I couldn't help but take notice. It claimed to be real Mexican food, made by real Mexicans. So, finally, I decided to give Mexican in Cape Town just one last try, and even convinced a couple of fellow diners to come along.

San Julian was opened by the Garcia family in 2010, and was a home-base for Mexicans during the FIFA World Cup (being fortuitously close to Green Point stadium). The fact that it was, and still is, visited by Mexicans boded well for the authenticity of my eagerly awaited dinner.

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On a quiet street in the city centre, it's not a restaurant you could easily miss. Windows covered in fairy lights bathe the street in a warm glow and invite every passer-by in. We were charmed before even getting inside. Walking into the restaurant, we were greeted immediately by a warm atmosphere and a friendly waiter. The interior looked and felt like what I imagine a true Mexican restaurant to be like. The décor is bright and a little kitsch. The walls are pink, with decorative crosses all over the wall above a charming arched doorway. Posters and flags cover the walls, and the ceiling is hung with bright tissue paper piñatas (some of them, hilariously, shaped like llamas). At the back of the restaurant is a bar with more kinds of tequila than I knew existed.

And we weren't the only cold Capetonians convinced to leave our homes on a dismal wintery night – the restaurant was buzzing. Despite the busyness the atmosphere was relaxed and casual, which was impressive, as it could easily have been frenetic with so much tequila in such a small space. Perhaps it's their sipping rather than gulping approach to the huge range of tequila which kept the atmosphere intact.

When it came to ordering drinks other than tequila, however, many of the beers were out of stock. This was quite disappointing as their range of craft beers looked impressive and I would have loved to try more out. The horchata, a sweet milky drink which I'd been looking forward to trying, was also off the menu that night. Missing menu items proved a theme of the evening, as when I tried to order the Chilitos, kind of like a Mexican chilli popper, they were also woefully absent.

"you could taste that the tacos were fresh and handmade"

But what we did order for starters was delicious. The Empanadas de Requeson, little pastry parcels filled with ricotta, red onion and coriander, served on refried beans, was beautiful light and fresh, but a big portion for a starter. My only qualm was that the beans were quite underseasoned, and no salt or pepper was provided.

For mains, I ordered fish tacos, while my fellow diners tried Sopos de Chorizo, which had been recommended on all other reviews I'd read, and the Chilorio taco. What was really wonderful was that you could taste that the tacos were fresh and hand made, unlike anything else I had tasted in Cape Town. They were soft and flavourful. In the case of the Sopos de Chorizo, they were perhaps a little too flavourful as we couldn't really taste anything besides the taco. As for the chorizo part of that dish, it was a little confusing, as it just seemed to be lightly spiced mince. My fish taco was excellent flavour-wise, and the fish was flaky and tender. The beer batter was far too thick and spongy, making it slightly soggy and nigh-impossible to eat in polite company, but the chipotle-ranch dressing made it worth the mess (and luckily my company was not all that polite).

"the star of the table was the Chilorio taco"

But the star of the table was the Chilorio taco, with which no fault could be found. Spiced, braised pork, tender and cooked to perfection, balanced delicately with cheese, onions and coriander, and served with the staples of guacamole, pico de gallo (a mixture of chopped tomato, onion, chilli and coriander) and two chilli sauces.

By the time pudding came, we were all pretty stuffed, and decided to share one portion between the three of us. And I was so glad that we did! The

only dessert on the menu, Buñuelos, is crispy deep fried tacos served with goat's milk caramel and vanilla ice cream. It may sound a little out-there, but it was so good. Exactly the level of sweetness demanded at the end of a meal like this.

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The bill came to around R400 for three of us, for one starter, three mains, one dessert and three beers. So not cheap, but not breaking the bank either. And for authentic, fresh and delicious food like that, served in such a warm and welcoming atmosphere, I'd go back to San Julian's Taco and Tequila any day.

San Julian Taco and Tequila
3 Rose Street (the bottom end, near Green Point)
Bo-Kaap
Cape Town

Tel: 021 419 4233

Booking not essential, but useful as they can get very busy.



Above: The huge range of tequilas



Left: Empanadas de Requeson, filled with ricotta, red onion and coriander



Left: Fish tacos with chipotle ranch dressing