



Dining Downtown, with Sarah Zorn

Traversing West Orange's Downtown in search of outstanding eats

Benji's Taqueria Mexican Grill

Consider it the professional food writer's tiny violin complaint. There's so much time and appetite expended on trying the newest, hottest restaurant, there's simply no bandwidth left to become a regular anywhere. So during my years spent darting around NYC, in an effort to be amongst the first to dine at this establishment or that, my husband became an expert of his own, hyper-specific beat — i.e., discovering the best food that could be summoned to him on Seamless.

Being a creature of habit, he'd inevitably hone in on a single spot, meaning I'd stumble in past midnight from some tasting menu-only place in Manhattan, to find the kitchen littered with a familiar assortment of takeout. So it was unsurprising, upon moving to West Orange, that while I continued to commute to the city, he quickly familiarized himself with Downtown's delivery options. And he just as speedily declared allegiance to Benji's.

For a while, my opinion was formed solely from his leftovers; I knew he was partial to the carnitas burrito, and that Benji's makes terrific salsa, guacamole and tortilla chips, which I gladly repurposed as chilaquiles the next morning. Yet finally visiting Benji's myself allowed me to take charge of the ordering and appreciate how much more to the eatery there is than (excellent) Americanized burritos.

For starters, their tacos would easily pass muster amongst the throngs that haunt the carts in Sunset Park; Brooklyn's premiere Mexican enclave. Palm-sized, double-layered and flavorful in their own right, tortillas cradle everything from crumbly spiced chorizo to spit-roasted pork to — a popular street cart order — beef tongue. Cucumbers, cilantro and radish are available accompaniments, although a side of grilled nopales (cactus), and sweet cambray onions is a must.

If offered as a special, don't sleep on the ceviche, featuring fat shrimp or fish just barely cooked in an assertively citrusy marinade, thick with creamy avocado chunks. And deeply earthy huitlacoche (one of my personal favorite ingredients) adds interest to that beloved dorm snack, quesadillas. In less than sexy terms, it's a type of fungus that grows on ears of corn. In more appetizing language, it's akin to Mexican truffle.

Main courses easily feed two, especially considering they come with a duo of sides like rice and beans and more of those good tortillas. Not listed on the online menu, they're another reason to pay Benji's an in-person visit...hope to find tender, bone-in pork chops, pounded flat, and smothered with simmered tomatillos.

While my husband will happily continue to accrue credits on his punch card for burritos, I'm grateful that he helped me discover legit, homestyle Mexican — of the sort I willingly traveled for in Brooklyn, now easily had by a quick trip downtown. But whether you take out or dine in, you'll probably want to ask for some of those wonderful chips and salsas to go. They make for awesome chilaquiles the next morning.