

ODE TO THE REAL RESTAURANT ON 4TH STREET

By Watts Richmond

Among all of the dining options available to the hungry stomach in Marin County, San Rafael's Fourth street remains a gem. Deviating away from the typical model found in Marin (if you've spent time here, you're probably sick of fast-casual burger joints and health food at this point), a short walk along Fourth street will offer you a wide array of cuisines boasting some of Marin's more delicious restaurants. To name a few: Chic ramen bars, an upscale cozy Indian restaurant, handmade fresh Italian egg pasta, and delicious Puerto Rican pollo al horno can all be found along the main strip. While many of these spots are well worth a visit, gentrification has warped these restaurants into less of a casual "grab a bite" type of meal, but rather the \$20-30 entree that you've probably become all too familiar with here in Marin. In all honesty, 4th street just feels expensive as you stroll by the never ending cycle of pop-in boutiques and hip cafes selling you an \$8 cup of coffee with a little swirl-heart pattern.

Then there is Taqueria San Jose. Detached from the rest of 4th street, Taqueria San Jose is hidden, tucked under the highway overpass of 101 North. Located about 500m before "the main strip" of 4th street, you likely wouldn't know to stop here unless someone had told you about it. Nearly swallowed by both the overpass and trees growing around it, the modest, mild orange stucco exterior with a green and white striped cabana and old sign reading "taqueria" don't do enough for this local joint to catch the eye of unknowing visitors with a hungry stomach. But then again, you're not coming here for the industrial chic decor, dim lighting hanging from Edison bulb light fixtures, high top seating, and indie-alternative music softly playing behind your meal, you wouldn't have turned off right before the overpass. You would have kept driving the extra 500m until you found yourself in the middle of 4th street's main strip, jockeying for metered parking.

You were 4 when you first had a super burrito from Taqueria San Jose. The only reason you remember it so specifically is because it was right around the time you learned to bike. After thousands of laps on the bike path above your house, you finally graduated from the training wheels on your candy-apple-red Spiderman bike. Every bike you bought growing up was from the Re-Cyclery (a second hand bike shop) located directly across the street from Taqueria San Jose. You remember the first time you got an al-pastor super burrito and a jamaica (a hibiscus flower sweet drink) with your dad. The burrito looked impossibly large to your young eyes. The foil blob mounted on top of the table looked like it was right out of one of the larger-than-life food storms from *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs*, like a burrito that had just fallen out of the sky and onto your plate. After carefully peeling back the foil and trying to stretch your small mouth over the tortilla you finally take your first bite. Since then, you've both been back over 50 times since.

Starting with what's on the menu, the street tacos are simple but a classic. They aren't necessarily cheap (coming at around \$2-3 a taco), but they are more affordable than anything else

you'll find on 4th St. Consisting of two homemade small corn tortillas fresh off the comal, a heaping mountain of sizzling meat (they have everything from carne asada and pollo asado, to lengua and tripa, but I have always loved the spicy marinated al-pastor), diced white onion and cilantro, and a spoonful of the house salsa (so fresh you can still taste the slight char of the tomatillos and the lingering kick of the peppers in your throat after each bite) these tacos are as traditional as the ones you'd find in the mercados in Oaxaca. Each taco is loaded up to the point where it is hard to wrap the tortillas around the meat without spilling anything. You should probably go for 3 or 4 if you're hungry, but I have often come here after soccer practice and ordered 6-8, served on an oblong platter, lined up neatly just to be gone in minutes. If endless tacos aren't your speed, they also have a great mission-style super burrito which is sure to fill you up for around \$8-9 (the best deal I know of in Marin). Also, you can't enjoy a meal at Taqueria San Jose without getting one of the fresh agua frescas to wash it all down. You should try the jamaica, a tart/sweet, ruby red hibiscus drink that perfectly cuts through and rinses away the rich fattiness that coated your mouth from taco after taco.

After you've properly familiarized yourself with the tacos (some would argue this is a near impossible task), you may want to venture to some of the items you're not going to find on the menu. First off, it goes without saying that a traditional Mexican restaurant must have a free chip bar. What makes this one special is the vibrant, rainbow array of salsas, cremas, hot sauces, and pickled veggies/peppers. Then you have different staple dishes native to different regions of Mexico. To name a few, even if these items aren't specifically on the menu you'll find people eating: Oaxacan moles, chile rellenos, deliciously thick sopas, tortas, taquitos/flautas, pozoles, caldo de res, and slow cooked pull-apart birria. Every time you'll journey back, a new surprise "off-menu" specialty will catch your eye whether you see it sizzling on the griddle behind the register, or piled onto the platter of a San Rafael local, emerging from a thick base of Mexican rice, refried beans, and shredded lettuce.

You'll find just about anyone who has spent enough time in or around San Rafael here. The clientele is consistent, and the food is undoubtedly without frills, feeding people who want a hearty, delicious lunch without completely emptying their wallets. Taqueria San Jose has been consistently serving all demographics of San Rafael including hard-working day laborers, new migrant families, highschoolers, etc. Come during the heat of lunch and the line will be out the door and wrapping around the corner. It moves rather quickly though, and best you'll never find yourself waiting any more than five minutes after putting your order in. The restaurant is run by the same family, and you'll always greet the same friendly face at the register (though he'll frequently be juggling tasks, taking a phone call, filling up an ice cold horchata, and passing orders back to the kitchen all while taking your order). Taqueria San Jose is loved by the people of San Rafael as it provides a much needed alternative to the \$8 cappuccino further down fourth street. The antithesis of overpriced, trendy Marin health-food, this lesser recognized restaurant in Marin serves as a pillar of San Rafael's lesser recognized community, and its value of happily serving the city's unsung locals make it the most important restaurant you'll find on 4th street.