

# Wine & Dine / Tacos and Margaritas

## The Perfect Pair

DISCOVER SOME OF THE FINEST TACO AND MARGARITA COMBINATIONS AROUND TOWN.

By ASHLEY RYAN



Left: fish tacos and the Chile del Diablo margarita at Harvest; right: citrus chicken soft tacos and the skinny margarita at South of Nick's

Tacos abound in Laguna Beach, from festive Mexican classics and fresh seafood delights to distinctly Asian offerings. And few things complement these savory favorites better than a sweet and refreshing margarita.

"The appeal of taco and margarita pairings lies in the harmonious marriage of flavors and the enjoyable contrast they provide," says Gretchen McConnell, founder and chef at Starfish Laguna. "... [Plus, they] remind you of being on vacation."

Whether it's Taco Tuesday or you're simply looking to satisfy a craving, these local eateries have got you covered, offering delectable pairings to enjoy day or night.

### HARVEST

With its fresh air, canyon views and peaceful atmosphere, dining on the patio at Harvest almost feels as if you've been transported out of Laguna. For a meal that is just as refreshing as the breeze, order the Baja-inspired fish tacos. Local catch is lightly battered then layered atop napa cabbage slaw and pico de gallo tossed in a lime crema before it's all finished with salsa macha. Add a kick to the meal with the Chile del Diablo margarita, crafted with chile de arbol-infused Xicaru mezcal, Cointreau and a house-made hibiscus syrup that provides a vibrant red hue and touch

of floral sweetness. Garnished with two small peppers and a Tajín rim, the two pair flawlessly. "The crunchy beer batter of the fish and the freshness of the lime crema help balance the Chile del Diablo while the toasted peanuts and smokiness of the salsa macha help complement the drink's flavor profile," notes Kyle St. John, executive chef at The Ranch at Laguna Beach, which is home to Harvest. (949-715-1376; theranchlb.com)

### SOUTH OF NICK'S

Whether ordered a la carte or as part of a combo plate with Spanish rice, beans or street corn, the soft tacos at South of



From left: Korean tacos and the Lagniappe margarita at Starfish Laguna; blackened shrimp tacos and a margarita flight at Finney's Crafthouse; pork belly tacos and The Pearl margarita at Las Brisas

Nick's are full of vibrant flavor thanks to the fresh ingredients used in the scratch kitchen. While the eatery serves up carnitas, ranchera beef or birria varieties, the citrus chicken is ideal for those looking for a little healthier option. Cheese is melted into a blue corn tortilla, then topped with charred chunks of chicken, onions, cilantro, pico de gallo and sour cream. Cut down on calories by sipping a skinny margarita as you dine. The refreshing drink, which complements the taco masterfully with a bold citrus taste, mixes Milagro's blanco tequila, fresh lime and agave nectar. Imbibe with one or many, as you can also opt for a pitcher. (949-715-3717; nicksrestaurants.com)

### STARFISH LAGUNA

You may not expect to find tacos at an Asian fusion restaurant, but the menu at Starfish Laguna features unique Korean tacos. Piled high with USDA Prime flat iron steak that has been marinated in soy and a Chinese rice wine called michiu, this dish is distinctly eastern. In addition to the meat, the warm corn tortillas contain zesty vegetables—pickled in-house—and a drizzle of gochujang aioli that provides a hint of

spiciness. Enhance your meal by pairing the tacos with the Lagniappe margarita. "The ... margarita's mint and citrus notes complement the flavors of our Korean tacos, particularly enhancing ... [their] traditional Asian ingredients," McConnell notes. With a name that means "a small gift," this drink is definitely a prize, with silver tequila, muddled mandarin orange, fresh lime, mint and a splash of soda to create some texture. (949-715-9200; starfishcalifornia.com)

### FINNEY'S CRAFTHOUSE

For a meal full of contrasting flavors, try the blackened shrimp tacos with the colorful margarita flight at Finney's Crafthouse. "Blackened shrimp tacos and our fantastic margaritas perfectly balance each other on the palate—spicy and sweet, with a hint of tequila," says Eric BosRau, Finney's executive chef. Two large tacos are stuffed with juicy pieces of shrimp, covered in Asian coleslaw and pineapple salsa, and finished off with a pungent wasabi aioli. Meanwhile, the margarita flight features miniature glasses that contain four flavors: blood orange, guava, watermelon and hibiscus. These delectable libations enhance the pineapple on the tacos,

bringing the meal full circle with the vibrant taste of each of these fruity sips. (949-484-8140; finneycrafthouse.com)

### LAS BRISAS

Indulge in the pork belly tacos at Las Brisas while soaking up the sun and taking in views of Main Beach on the patio with a margarita in hand. "Las Brisas is the perfect setting for this delicious combo," says Samantha DeLeon, chef at Las Brisas. "... Tacos, margaritas and an ocean view make me feel like I'm on vacation in Mexico somewhere, which is always a good time." The tender pork, coated in a chile glaze, is tucked into blue corn tortillas then smothered in a relish made from tomatillos, chipotle peppers, garlic and shallots. The dish is finished with rings of fresh shallots and dots of tomatillo sauce. To drink, you simply must try The Pearl margarita, a refreshing option featuring Butterfly Cannon's Rosa tequila, which is infused with pink grapefruit, plus creme de violette and lime juice. Placed on top, a tiny shell rests against a tropical green leaf, concealing a small mango popping pearl—a hidden treasure to enjoy. (949-497-5434; lasbrisaslagunabeach.com) ■

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LEFT: COURTESY OF STARFISH LAGUNA; MIDDLE AND RIGHT PHOTOS: ASHLEY RYAN