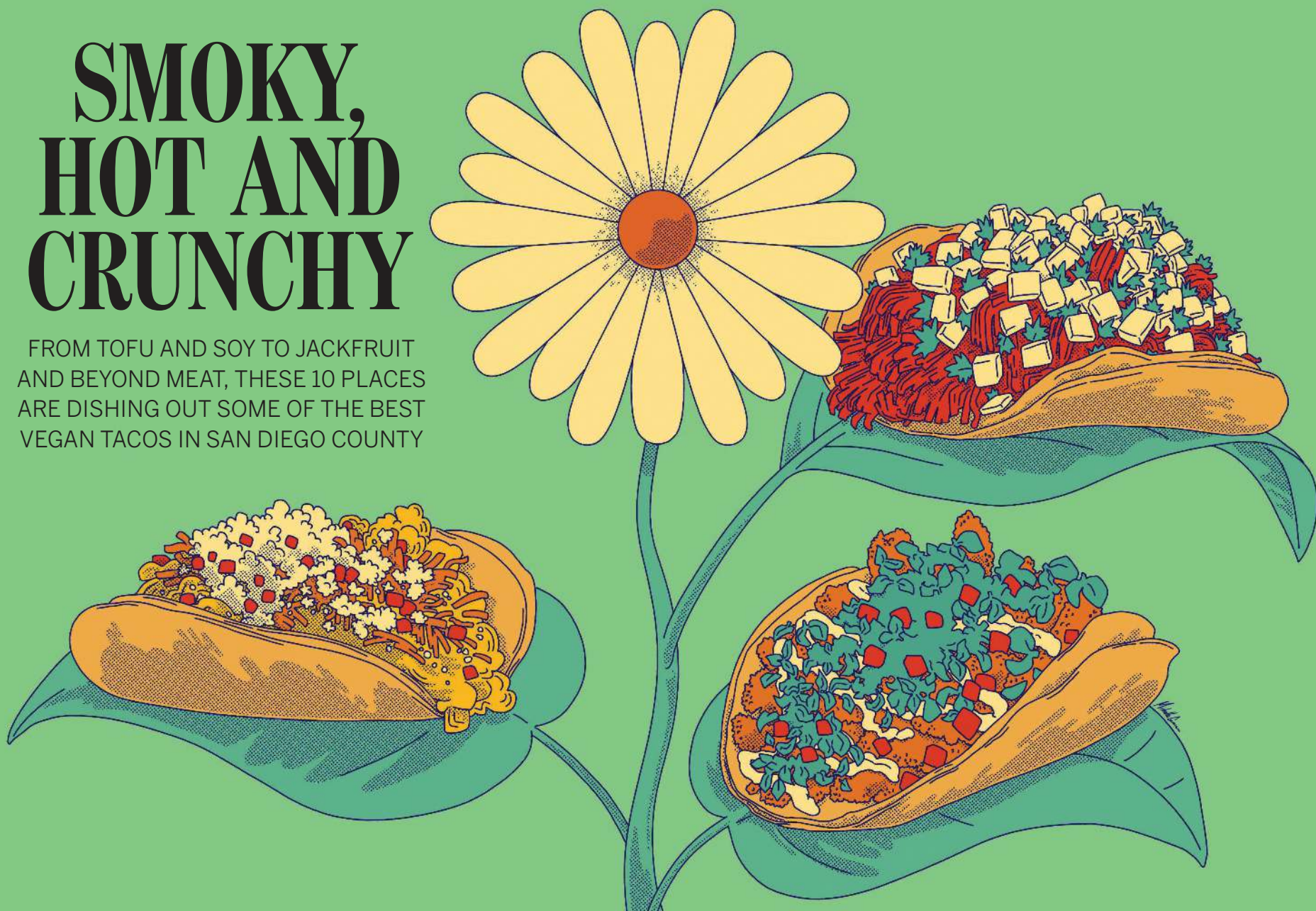


SMOKY, HOT AND CRUNCHY

FROM TOFU AND SOY TO JACKFRUIT AND BEYOND MEAT, THESE 10 PLACES ARE DISHING OUT SOME OF THE BEST VEGAN TACOS IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY



MICHELLE GUERRERO U-T

BY CARLOS RICO & MAURA FOX

It's no secret that tacos are a San Diego staple, but it may be a lesser-known fact that the county's vegan taco scene is bursting with flavor and quality.

Just like their non-vegan counterparts, vegan tacos come in various shapes, sizes and styles. Locally, they are often soy- or wheat-based and made with tofu, jackfruit, plantain, fried squash, mushrooms, potatoes and other plant-based foods. Some restaurants also use plant-based products to create substitutes for meat like fish, chicken and beef. While many of these tacos present a greener alternative to a traditional meat-based taco, there are plenty of hearty and authentic vegan tacos around town.

We visited various eateries in San Diego County that specialize in vegan tacos or have at least two options on their menu. This guide highlights 10 favorites based on taste, environment and customer service.

City Tacos

For diners looking for an all-veggie taco, City Tacos is a good option. The San Diego-based taco shop chain offers two veggie tacos — the city zucchini and portobello taco — that can be customized to be vegan without their dairy ingredients. (It also offers a vegetarian chile relleno taco with peppers filled with Oaxaca and cotija cheeses.) The zucchini taco, which is packed with fried zucchini, caramelized onions, black beans, corn, cherry tomatoes, olives, capers and microgreens, was bursting with flavor. It comes with a lime aioli and asadero cheese, but just order it without those items to go full vegan.

Plus, the restaurant's "taco of the month" for January is the

Green Machine, made with tempura green beans, arugula, a squash and red pepper medley and more. Make it vegan without the aioli sauce. Topped with tortilla crisps, this taco is refreshing and has a nice crunch. *Locations across the county.* citytacossd.com

MAURA FOX

El Veganito

For an exploration of vegan eats at the mall, visit El Veganito at the Grossmont Center food court. This plant-based Mexican shop offers six vegan tacos, including adobada (soy-based), birria (jackfruit and hibiscus), carnitas (jackfruit), fish (soy and gluten), potato, tofu and veggie. They come in orders of two or three street-sized tacos.

The adobada tacos, with a hint of heat and smokiness, are stuffed with a soy-based protein that tastes like a classic adobo salsa marinade with ancho and guajillo chiles. The tacos are sprinkled with raw onions and cilantro and come with slices of lime, radishes and cucumbers on the side. They're kind of dry, probably because there is no fat from traditional pork adobada, but come with red and green hot sauces on the side to spice things up. *5500 Grossmont Center Drive, La Mesa. (619) 303-7247, [instagram.com/elveganitosd](https://www.instagram.com/elveganitosd)*

CARLOS RICO

Hugo's Cocina

This comfortable Ocean Beach Mexican restaurant sells eight vegan tacos, with varieties

including fish, nopales, carne asada and sweet potato. But it doesn't stop there; for nearly every meat-based dish, the restaurant has a vegan option as well, such as enchiladas, tostadas and tamales. It was tempting to try everything, but for the purposes of this guide, the tofu and shiitake tacos hit the mark. Both came out much larger than expected, heaped with lettuce, pico de gallo and guacamole. The tofu and shiitake were grilled and seasoned with the restaurant's house spices, which added a nice smokiness to the meal, though it also made the tacos taste slightly similar. Overall, though, the filling tacos — coupled with Hugo's inviting and colorful decor — made for an enjoyable dinner.

11 a.m. to 9 p.m. 1830 Sunset Cliffs Blvd., San Diego. (619) 892-7882, hugoscocina.com

MAURA FOX

Liticker's Liquor & Mexican Grill

It isn't common to find a restaurant inside a liquor store, let alone one with a full vegan menu. But that's exactly what makes Liticker's Mexican & Vegan Cuisine stand out. Located in Ocean Beach, this Mexican eatery's vegan options are accompanied by the shop's effortlessly cool, slightly grunge atmosphere — a perfect fit for this vibrant beach town.

With 10 vegan tacos to choose from, along with the five additional Tijuana-style vegan tacos, it might be difficult to settle on an order, but give the chicken and carne asada tacos a try. Made with a soy protein, both are topped with Mexican salsa, lettuce, guacamole and vegan cheese. On the first bite, they were a little salty, but adding extra salsa and a squeeze of lime help balance out the flavors. At \$6.99 each, these tacos aren't cheap, but it's worth it to experience this unique spot. Plus, Liticker's outdoor seating means you can grab a drink with your tacos and stay awhile. 4955 Voltaire St., San Diego. (619) 224-6031, litickersmexicangrill.com

MAURA FOX

Lola 55

Enjoy vegan tacos with cocktail options at Michelin-recognized Lola 55 in downtown San Diego. This restaurant, with plush furniture, a full bar and open kitchen, has a fancy living room vibe for enjoying two types of vegan tacos.

The Squa-shroom taco has lion's mane mushrooms with



CARLOS RICO U-T

Soy-based adobada tacos with raw onions, cilantro, limes, radishes and cucumbers at El Veganito at Grossmont Center.



PAM KRAGEN U-T

SeaCo Catch "fysh" taco at the Encinitas Vegan Food Pop-Up.



CARLOS RICO U-T

The Squa-shroom taco at Lola 55 downtown.

wheat-based beer batter, pieces of beet soyriso, squash blossom, poblano salsa and a potato chicharrón on top. It has a mix of heat and savoriness with the poblano salsa and an airy batter on the mushrooms.

The rainbow cauliflower taco lives up to its name with a colorful display and sweet and spicy taste. It has green avocado mouse, red morita dulce salsa, golden raisins, wheat-based eggplant bacon and slightly charred cauliflower. *1290 F St., San Diego. (619) 542-9155, lola55.com*

CARLOS RICO

Phatties Vegan Mexican Restaurant

What started as a food truck is now one of the most authentic-tasting Mexican taco shops serving an all-vegan menu in San Diego County. Phatties Vegan Mexican Restaurant in Escondido is in a strip mall with seating for about 20 people, colorful murals and paintings on the wall and Latin music playing in the background.

It dishes out seven different tacos: adobada (soy meat), avocado, carne asada (Beyond Meat), chicharrón (seitan mixed with soy meat), fish (deep-fried breaded soy tenders), nopales (diced prickly pear cactus leaf) and shrimp (deep-fried breaded soy tenders).

The soy-based fish taco has a light and airy batter with a similar crunch and taste you can get from a traditional fish taco on a corn tortilla. It is topped with red cabbage, diced tomato, avocado, vegan sour cream and colorful coleslaw.

The chicharrón taco comes with creamy brown refried beans, smokey prickly pear cactus, sliced avocado, cilantro and seitan mixed with soy meat and a homemade serrano tomatillo sauce that tastes like ground beef. *242 W. Mission Ave., Suite D, Escondido. (442) 286-7242, phattiesfoods.com*

CARLOS RICO

Pokez

For vegan options with simple non-spicy flavors, try Pokez in downtown San Diego. This is a vegetarian Mexican eatery with about 20 vegan menu choices.

I tried the tofu, potato and mushroom option, which is stuffed inside two soft and robust corn tortillas, along with shredded lettuce and tomatoes. This taco is filling, since it was close to the size of a small burrito, and comes with a side of homemade mild hot sauce and a handful of tortilla chips.



MAURA FOX U-T

The vegan shrimp tacos from Ranchos Cocina are topped with cabbage, a flavorful tartar sauce and vegan cream.

Pokez has been around since 1994. Inside it has a hacienda living room feel with spacious room for groups, wooden tables and walls, and the smell of a home-cooked meal. *947 E St., San Diego. (619) 702-7160, pokezsd.com*

CARLOS RICO

Ranchos Cocina

This sit-down restaurant in the heart of North Park offers both vegan and non-vegan options on its full menu. Find vegan tacos as part of Ranchos Cocina's combo plates or purchase them on their own, including fish, shrimp, pollo and carne asada varieties. The shrimp tacos were delicious, made with seaweed-based grilled shrimp and topped with pico de gallo, tartar sauce, a vegan cream and cabbage. Each order of two vegan tacos is \$9 — plus \$1 extra for the shrimp — and they are on the small side.

Fortunately, Ranchos Cocina gives every table complimentary chips and salsa for some extra nosh. Beyond the tacos, Ranchos Cocina offers a great selection of vegan options in a low-key environment with traditional Mexican decor, ideal for a date night or family dinner. *3910 30th St., San Diego. (619) 574-1288, ranchoscocinanorthpark.com*

MAURA FOX

SeaCo Catch

This vegan taco company makes the white "meat" for its fish taco out of coconut meat — something it calls "f'ish." Fried up and topped with pico de gallo, cilantro, sauce and a side of lime, these tacos pack a crunch that is similar to that of a fish-based taco, all without the animal products. Find these tacos at vegan food pop-up markets around San Diego, or purchase a taco at

North County restaurants including Shoots in Carlsbad and Honey's in Encinitas. Opting for a fish taco night at home? Buy the "f'ish" at Thousand Petal Lotus in Vista or at the San Diego Vegan Market. *seacocatch.com*

MAURA FOX

Tacotarian

With Mexico City inspiration, Tacotarian has a great selection of vegan tacos. This North Park plant-based Mexican restaurant has about 15 vegan taco choices like one with fried beer-battered avocado, cilantro-lime slaw, guacamole and pico de gallo.

I tried the carne asada taco, which had seitan (wheat gluten), guacamole and pico de gallo. With this taco there are flavors similar to carne asada with less smokiness. I also sampled the plantain con mole taco, which has pickled red onions, sesame

and Mexican crema. The mole was a traditional chocolate color and had a slightly smokey flavor. The plantain was sweet and long enough to fill the tortilla.

Each was the size of a street-style taco with double corn tortillas that tasted like homemade masa and come with a choice of four salsas ranging from habanero to mild tomatillo.

Tacotarian has the feel of a cafeteria with lots of open seating for groups, pairs or singles, but with a twist. It can also act as a co-working space with free Wi-Fi and a bar with a menu that includes margaritas, cocktails and Mexican beer to hang out during happy hour. *4332 30th St., San Diego. (619) 432-1815, eattacotarian.com*

CARLOS RICO

carlos.rico@suniontribune.com
maura.fox@suniontribune.com