

Eye Street

DINING OUT



ALEX HORVATH / THE CALIFORNIAN

Try all the flavors at Sancho's Tacos including the Surf & Turf (made with tri-tip and sautéed shrimp), OG (with tri-tip) and Federale (with carnitas).

Sancho's Tacos wraps us in comfort

Deliciousness is in the details, even down to the chips and ice

PETE TITTL
FOR THE CALIFORNIAN

I've read that one positive benefit of the pandemic has been a big boost to the Bakersfield real estate market as we are probably the most affordable big city in the state. Since many are working from home, why not live in a place where an ordinary person can afford a home? Supply of said homes is another issue, but let's hope that the market will take care of that.

And so now we have established family businesses taking advantage of our more business-friendly climate by opening up here, such as the impressive Sancho's Tacos, which debuted in a small space adjacent to the Silver Fox Starlite Lounge downtown.

The owners have locations in Huntington Beach, San Clemente, Newport Beach, Laguna Niguel and Oceano, all opened since 2010 by founder Donnie Lancaster.

You might have a tendency to prejudge, but I went with an open mind, even though I



The interior features designs by a Fresno artist who goes by Kool Hand Luke at Sancho's Tacos.

know how insanely competitive those restaurant markets are and also acknowledging that we have some amazing, heavily praised taco places established here.

Prepare to be wowed, as we were when we took four people on a Wednesday and ordered a passel of food that included a bean burrito (\$5.99), a chicken burrito (\$8.35), chips with salsa (\$3.95), almost every taco on the board including the OG (\$3.35,

tri-tip), the amazing Federale (\$3.20, carnitas), Skrimps (\$3.95, a grilled shrimp taco that can compete with the amazing Manuel's just to the south of this place) and the Surf & Turf (\$5.45, made with tri-tip and sautéed shrimp).

Everything was good in ways that will inspire future visits, though we'll probably go back on Tuesdays when the manager told a nearby table that all tacos were \$2 from 4 to 8 p.m. Crowds get so thick at

their other locations that they stay open an hour later on Tuesdays.

One complaint we had was that you couldn't get a cerveza with the tacos; those two are natural companions. In our eavesdropping we heard the manager commenting that the Silver Fox next door didn't want them competing with them and as the landlord wouldn't let them sell beer or wine. I seriously doubt there will be

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These threads do not break

Last weekend, I was pushing our La Jolla grandkids on the swings when we noticed a spider and spiderweb a few feet above the top of the swingset.

The web was attached to the row of Podocarpus bushes closest to the swings on one side and then appeared suspended 10 feet above the ground in sort of a spider magic trick.

When the sun shifted, you could see a single thread attached to the web spanning 15 feet in the opposite direction, secured to the wrought-iron fence on the other side. The thread was slender but strong and who knows how long it had withstood sun, wind and weather.



HERB BENHAM
THE CALIFORNIAN

It had been six months since we'd seen 3-year-old Lillian and Andrew, now 5, due to COVID and a set of careful parents.

We'd visited twice in the driveway in August, everybody wearing masks, but it's not the same thing. Grandchildren are for holding, reading stories to, sitting next to at the dinner table toasting your champagne to their milk, wrestling, swimming and catching sand crabs at the beach.

Seeing them means seeing their faces and them seeing yours and anything short of that doesn't quite measure.

In order to accomplish this visit, we took a rapid COVID test that Friday morning. Six hours later, already on the road and in our room at the Residence Inn in Carmel Valley, ARCpoint Labs emailed us the results that we had both tested negative. Negative is good. Negative was positive.

"Would you like to come over right now for some champagne," Katie texted, after we relayed the results.

Yes. We can drive, fly with our newly sprouted wings or sprint along the freeway like greyhounds.

"We've told the kids," she said. "They're very excited."

As with everything else these days, there was a video. Katie asked them who, if they could see anybody in the world, would they want to see right now.

"Papa," Andrew said. I knew he meant Mimi, too, or I told her that to make her feel better. Then Katie said, "They're going to come over now."

We did. It was like returning from war. There weren't many medals but there were a fair amount of scars and some COVID PTSD, which

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COURTESY OF SUE BENHAM

Lillian and Andrew have fun with Papa during a recent visit in La Jolla.

THE DISH

Opa in October! Orders begin for Greek Food Festival

BY STEFANI DIAS
sdias@bakersfield.com

Tuesday marked the official first day of fall, but the season is really marked in Bakersfield by the arrival of community events. Although the social calendar is very different this year, thankfully activities like the Bakersfield Greek Food Festival are still in the mix.

Being held on the first four Saturdays in October, the festival put on by St. George Greek Orthodox Church will be offered as a takeout event with different dinner entrees highlighted each week.

Greek chicken — a half-chicken spiced with lemon and oregano, served with Greek potatoes — will be offered this Saturday. For \$15, diners receive the chicken along with salad, feta cheese and bread. A gyro can be substituted for any weekly entree in the dinner package throughout the festival. It can also be ordered separately for \$7.

Other entrees will be boneless leg of lamb with Greek potatoes (Oct. 10), pork souvlaki (shish kabobs) with rice pilaf (Oct. 17) and

SOMETHING TO DISH?

Do you have a tip, question or recommendation on Bakersfield restaurants, trends or food news in general? Email the-dish@bakersfield.com, and your input might wind up in a future column.

chicken souvlaki with Greek lemon rice (Oct. 24).

Orders can be made now on the event website bakersfieldgreek-foodfestival.org for pick-up on Saturday at the church, 401 Truxtun Ave.

Items being sold a la carte range from pastitsio, a sort of Greek lasagna, (\$5 or \$30 for a quarter-sheet) to savory pastries such as spanakopita (spinach and cheese) and tiropita (cheese), which will be sold for \$2 or \$5 for three. Dolmades, stuffed grape leaves, will be offered for \$2, \$5 for three or \$15 for a dozen.



ALEX HORVATH / THE CALIFORNIAN

Mary Mekhel and Evanthia Frazier help prepare koulourakia, a cookie that the St. George Greek Orthodox Church hope to make more than 700 of for the Bakersfield Greek Food Festival, which will be held as a takeout event over four weekends in October.

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BENHAM

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dissolved in about the first five minutes of the excitement. You don't know, at least I didn't. Would they remember where we left off, the games we played, the vocabulary grandparents develop with their grandchildren, the fun visits to Bakersfield? Six months is a long time in the lives of a 5- and a 3-year-old and about 10 times as long for their grandparents. They remembered. Somebody said a prayer at dinner that night. There was a lot to pray for and, given 2020, we could have prayed all night and not covered everything. There was much to be thankful for, too, starting with this dinner. "Our father who art in heaven..." I noticed a few things the next morning. Andrew wanted to sit on the baby swing, the red plastic one

that he had outgrown but maybe he wanted to return to our visits six months ago, turn the clock back and start from where we had left off. He had company. Lillian's laughter seemed even purer and stronger than it had before and that was saying something. We bought a heart-shaped hazelnut birthday cake from the French Gourmet. We'd missed some birthdays together, but even if we hadn't, we were having a cake, blowing out candles, celebrating and making some wishes. Every day should be cake day. That night, we cuddled in Andrew's bed with him and Lillian. I told the scariest story I could think of, we sang "City of New Orleans" and we laughed. "I don't want you to go," Andrew said. "It will be a long time before you come back." I didn't think I had any more tears to shed but I was wrong. I had plenty and plenty more where they came from.

"We'll be back soon," Sue promised. It was a good thing she said it because I was pretty much mute and certainly incapable of starting a sentence much less finishing it. "It will be a long time," he said again. "Please don't go." How about we stay? For the next 20 years or when you're safely off to college or considering starting your own family. "I will think of you every day and pray for you every night," Sue said. When he was convinced we were telling him the truth and we wouldn't break our promise, he let go of our hands, drifted to sleep and dreamed what little boys dream. Superheroes, swings and a thread that will not break.

Contact The Californian's Herb Benham at 661-395-7279 or hbendam@bakersfield.com. His column appears on Sundays, Tuesdays and Fridays; the views expressed are his own.



Lillian and Andrew work on a craft project waiting for help from Papa and Mimi, who were able to visit with them at home in La Jolla recently.



"Come in, feed yer soul at Sancho's Tacos" is the message artistically displayed at the new restaurant in downtown Bakersfield. Much of Sancho's unique look is thanks to Fresno artist Kool Hand Luke.



The "Gran Chico" watches over customers dining outside Sancho's Tacos on 18th Street next to the Silver Fox Starlite Lounge.

DINING OUT

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people skipping the Silver Fox for Sancho's. Seems like two different crowds. Even the atmosphere is festive, with all sorts of freehand painting done by a guy who goes by Kool Hand Luke. He's decked out a Big Boy-like character ("Gran Chico") near the door wearing a sombrero and holding a plate of tacos. Inside there's more artistry that will put a smile on your face as you're probably waiting in line. It's a tiny place where you order and pay at the counter and they will bring your food out to the small patio outside. They get the smallest details so right, beginning with things like the chips and the ice in the drinks. The ice is what I call Sonic ice, those small cubes like the drive-in chain offers, which bring great

comfort during our hot summers no matter what drink they're floating in. The chips are not those thin, magazine-cover perfect chips you get in so many restaurants. These are gnarled, some thick, some split, some broken, some complete with small pockets that are perfect for entrapping some of their impressive salsas. Sure, they're not free, but mark them down as a must-order. The good impressions on that first visit just kept continuing. The bean and cheese burrito was made with refried beans that had some whole beans mixed in, a fresh grilled flour tortilla and a mix of cheddar and Jack cheese. It just oozed excellence. The shrimp in my taco (I wouldn't share — it was that good) were medium-sized and fresh tasting, grilled first then sautéed till lightly brown in butter

SANCHO'S TACOS
702 18th St., 348-4572, sanchostacos.com
Hours: 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Monday and Wednesday-Thursday, 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Tuesday, 8 a.m.-9 p.m. Friday-Sunday
Prices: Breakfast \$5.95-\$8.75, tacos \$2.99-\$5.45, burritos \$5.99-\$10.75, nachos and other extras \$2.95-\$9.25, churros \$3.25-\$5.75, child's menu \$2.99-\$4.75
Payment: Mastercard, Visa, American Express, Discover
Dress: Casual
Noise level: Low
Amenities: No alcohol served; some vegetarian options; takeout-friendly; family-friendly
Food: ★★½
Atmosphere: ★★½
Service: ★★½
Value: ★★½



Sancho's Tacos' eclectic interior features designs by a Fresno artist Kool Hand Luke.

and garlic, topped with chopped cabbage. You can get either the fish or shrimp deep fried with a beer batter, but with this sort of graceful treatment why would you?

The carnitas was soft and almost served with a gravy of sorts, so moist was the mixture with onions, cilantro, sour cream and Sancho's Chubbie Sauce. Some restaurants give you shredded strands, some give you chunks, this is a genuine original to me, like a great stew. The tri-tip is like elevated carne asada tacos, really flavorful and not tough in the least. And the grilled chicken in the burrito was similarly satisfying. The burrito itself is where I will head for future

visits because it was just rich with ingredients and textures and so balanced: rice, beans, fresh onions and cilantro, just the right amount of meat. They also have a tri-tip burrito with french fries in it, the CaliGuey (\$10.75). A friend told me afterward that we made a big mistake not ordering the churros, which are stunning and available in small or large sizes, made on the premises in the small kitchen as almost everything here is. The taco

made with grilled marinated flounder (\$3.35) is also supposed to be amazing. Motivation for future visits. If you love upscale Mexican food, Sancho's Tacos is a must visit. It can be recommended for a fine dining experience and is one of the best restaurants to open in Bakersfield this year. *Pete Tittl's Dining Out column appears here on Sundays. Email him at pttittl@yahoo.com or follow him on Twitter: @pttittl.*

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THE DISH

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Irene Sinapole, who helps publicize the festival, said she may stick to enjoying the treats rather than volunteering with assembly. "I was almost thrown out of rolling dolmades," she said of the kitchen sessions earlier this month when volunteers prepped certain dishes. "I had three lessons in rolling then they just said, 'Here, scoop the meat.'" Of course, what would the festival be without a selection of sweets. Luckily, the Greek pastries served annually at the event can easily be prepped and ready each week. "Greeks never use margarine," Sinapole said of the rich desserts. "It's butter, butter, butter." Offerings include baklava (\$3, \$15 for six) with or without walnuts; karydopita (with) or spout walnut cake; melomakarona, honey walnut cookies (\$10 for six); kourabiedes, powdered sugar cookies (\$10 for six); and koulourakia, tea cookies (\$10 for 12). Guests can also mix and match baklava and karydopita with a six-for-\$15 offer. There are also variety boxes (\$10-\$12) with different assortments of the aforementioned sweets. Pickup is available from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 4 to 8 p.m. on the designated Saturdays. Those coming to pick up their orders can park in the



Nick Hackleman finishes the cooking process on freshly made dolmades (stuffed grape leaves) in the kitchen at St. George Greek Orthodox Church.

Amtrak lot, then walk to the church's main entrance. Anyone who wants to order on site should enter the church grounds on the west side. Masks are required at all times and social distancing is expected. If you would prefer to have your order delivered that option will be available through Postmates. Orders must be made through the website with the "delivery" option selected. A delivery fee will be calculated and added on by Postmates. Each year, the church chooses a different organization to aid with funds from the event. (Past benefi-

ciaries have included the Assistance League of Bakersfield and the Alliance Against Family Violence and Sexual Assault.) This year funds will go to the Greek Orthodox Metropolis of San Francisco, which is assisting families and churches affected by fires in several states. For the latest updates, check out the festival's website bakersfieldgreekfoodfestival.org, Facebook page ([facebook.com/BakersfieldGreekFoodFestival/](https://www.facebook.com/BakersfieldGreekFoodFestival/)) or Instagram ([@bakersfieldgreekfest](https://www.instagram.com/bakersfieldgreekfest/)).