

# EATS

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the American culture during the past half-century or so, the dish has come a long way from a crispy shell filled with highly seasoned ground beef, shredded cheese, neon-hued cheese and diced tomatoes.

It's highly adaptable with shells ranging from soft to hard, corn to flour to vegetable and even eggs. Fillings can come from land or sea, and be savory or sweet. Folks cook them up that have never even been to Mexico.

I've been lucky that I have been to Mexico, and I have been on late night taco runs through the streets of Mexico City with my dear friend Franciso de Santiago Lazaro, a noted leading taco authority. You'll find him in Netflix's "Taco Chronicles."

At the end of the day, we aren't going to get a Taco al Pastor in Virginia Beach like you get at El Vilsito in Mexico City, but we are going to get some darn good tacos, and that's something to ole' about.

I found some recently at El Taco Loco at Hilltop in Virginia Beach.

**THE EAT: BAR TACOS, \$3.99 - \$4.66 each**

Taco's the name, and taco's the game.

Eleven tacos are available at El Taco Loco, some with more common fillings, and some not. Each offering is available as one taco or three; I decided to go solo to get a good variety. Another thing I liked is having the option of not just corn or flour tortillas, but also having the fillings served in a lettuce shell too.

There are barbecue, carne asada, carnitas, pollo asado, fish, ribeye and more. But there were three in particular that grabbed my attention.

One was the Tacos de Chorizo, a spicy offering of Mexican-style chorizo sausage topped with beans, cabbage and



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El Taco Loco at Hilltop in Virginia Beach offers almost a dozen assortments of their namesake tacos.

cheese. Of all the varieties of chorizo, I think Mexican is my favorite for the fiery flavors and coarse texture; this brick-red hue offering did not disappoint. Tempured by the creamy beans and mounds of cheese, it was absolutely delicious.

Also enjoyable was the Antonios Tacos al Carbon, a country-style taco of thinly sliced top round beef that is quick charred and diced. The grilled flavor — the carbon in al carbon — was rich and slightly smoky and very satisfying.

The third selection was also delicious, 24-hour smoked Beef Brisket Tacos. The flavorful cut of grilled beef was tender and smoky with a balanced blend of Tex-Mex seasonings. It is served with a slightly tart pomegranate glaze that works nice with the meat, sweet caramelized onions, and cheese.

A grilled avocado, a side to the al carbon and brisket tacos, came on my platter, and was a star feature. The char and smoke was heavy, a beautiful dichotomy to the creamy richness of the fruit. I would love to have a few of these in a taco shell and call it a day.

**THE DRINK: HOUSE MARGARITA**

I'm a sucker for a margarita, either frozen or on the rocks, and the offerings at quaint Tex-Mex restaurants such as El Taco Loco always hit the spot.

The concoction that helped me hang on today

was frozen and a vivid lime green hue. It was thick and boozy, served in a mason jar, and crowned with a thick salt rim. Each icy sip was a delight, and paired perfectly with the varying levels of heat from the dishes that we ordered.

Upon ordering our second margarita — don't judge me — our server brought a treat: the familiar house margarita topped with just the right amount of strawberry. It was a fun, and thoughtful, touch.

**THE OBSERVATION**

Signage on the doors and throughout the restaurant about mask wearing and social distancing prompts guests to do both, as does the masked hostess who lead us to our table.

Two areas of the restaurant are closed, and within the open space, every other booth and table are marked off and not available for seating. Our server wore a mask and was properly distanced during our meal.

We ate mid-day and were the only customers in El Taco Loco, so we didn't observe any other tables being bussed or sanitized, but our area was very clean when we were seated.

El Taco Loco is located in the Hilltop East Shopping Center at 1564 Laskin Road. Call 757-226-9952 or find them on Facebook.

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF EPISCOPAL CHURCH OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD

**Above:** Church members work on the puppets outside the Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd. **Below:** A giant Advent wreath is another of Ben Blanchard's projects.

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They used newspaper, cardboard, pool noodles, Styrofoam and packing peanuts to create the Three Wise Men, with bodies made of PVC pipes, hula hoops and old external framed hiking backpacks.

Other members sewed costumes, some using fabric from Blanchard's trips to Malawi, Africa, where he has traveled as a guest musician. Blanchard also enlisted three teenagers to film the puppets at various Norfolk landmarks for a video to debut at the Jan. 6 processional for Epiphany, a celebration of the revelation of the Christ Child. The puppets will hang on church walls afterward.

"I want to get people doing things they never thought they'd do," he says. "That's how you make the best memories."

The same philosophy is behind Beer and Carols,



traditionally held the Sunday before Christmas and several other times a year. Blanchard pushes a piano into the West 24th Street brewery and invites participants to bring their own instruments and sing hymns together. Gatherings then morph into after-parties with themes as varied as Lady Gaga and the Hamilton musical.

Not surprisingly, Blanchard is fine with the occasional project fail, such as the year the timer went haywire on the outdoor Advent wreath.

"I drove by and everything is flashing like it's a disco ball at a club," he says. "People really knew Christmas was coming that year."

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