

Bohemeo's Baja Vibe

Fish and shrimp tacos rock.

By Katharine Shilcutt

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See photos from Bohemeo's colorful interior and kitchen

Troy Fields



At Bohemeo's, the fish tacos are fat, tasty surprises.

Where:
Bohemeo's

708 Telephone Rd.,
713-923-4277.

Details:
Hours: 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday and Tuesday, 11 a.m. to midnight Wednesday through Sunday.

Bo's Baja fish taco:
\$3

Shrimp nachos: **\$6**

Veggie pizza: **\$6**

Italian hoagie: **\$6**

Fruit and greens salad: **\$6.50**

Chips and salsa:
\$3.75

Hummus: **\$4.50**

[in our slideshow](#). "I have a bad feeling about this," my friend remarked ominously as we traveled down Leeland toward Bohemeo's one evening.

"Why?" I asked, confused.

"It's a coffee shop," he replied. "They aren't going to have good food. And I'm hungry." His brow furrowed in imagined anticipation of a sorrowful, meager meal surrounded by sullen hipsters and omnipresent mugs of java.

"Would you just trust me? It's good. I promise."

An hour later, he was smiling over an empty plate that held nary a trace of the grilled fish tacos he'd devoured. "All right," he admitted. "It was really good."

And therein lies the charm of Bohemeo's: No one seems to expect this little coffee shop in the East End to begin with, much less expect good food from it. The story of how Bohemeo's came to be is fascinating enough, but equally intriguing is the decent, inexpensive food it serves alongside individually brewed cups of Antigua La Flor and all-Beatles open-mike nights.

Bohemeo's is the creation of Sid and Lupe Olivarez, a husband-and-wife team who wanted to create an oasis in the East End — where they themselves are residents — for artists, students, musicians, coffee connoisseurs and anyone who desires a comfortable, welcoming, "home away from home" atmosphere. Bohemeo's certainly has that in spades.

When it first opened nearly five years ago, the coffee shop was just that — a coffee shop. It didn't yet have a full kitchen. But within only a couple of years, Lupe — a longtime Houston musician — and Sid — his wife and a talented artist — had started serving basics: wings, nachos, burgers. But those basics weren't your standard bar fare. The food was cheap and healthy. Sandwiches were served on whole grain bread; salads were more substantial than just iceberg lettuce and carrot shoestrings; an ample vegetarian section ensured that non-carnivorous types could enjoy more than just chips and salsa from the menu.

Mochachino: **\$3.50**

The restaurant portion of Bohemeo's is still going strong. New items are added all the time, sometimes at the encouragement of the regulars, who populate the colorful main room with laptops or books open, conversation usually quiet but vivacious.

It's a fantastic place to escape to for a weekday lunch, especially when the weather is cooperative and cool. On a recent Wednesday afternoon, I enjoyed a fruit and greens salad and a plate of hummus at one of the colorful mosaic tables in the main dining room. The salad wasn't anything groundbreaking — butter lettuce, diced apples, pumpkin seeds and a sweet, tangy poppyseed dressing — but it was good. It was better, even, than a somewhat similar salad I had had at Shade a few days earlier, a salad which cost nearly twice as much. The creamy poppyseed dressing and the salty pumpkin seeds were such a nice contrast to one another. The apples in the background provided a satisfying crunch with each bite.

The hummus didn't taste homemade, but it was pleasantly tangy. No skimping on tahini or lemon juice here. My only complaint was the pita bread, which — like all of the other breads and tortillas served here — was whole wheat. It was fluffy and thick, but had an unpleasant mineral taste that I couldn't quite pin down. It simply didn't taste like bread. I normally enjoy whole wheat pita, but this left me cold. Unwilling to let a little thing like that spoil my lunch, I ate the hummus with my fork and left Bohemeo's quite happy.

On other occasions, though, the whole wheat bread and tortillas have been a welcome sight. A veggie pizza ordered there one evening took a confusingly long time to cook. I wondered at one point if my order had been forgotten. But the pizza finally emerged from the kitchen and I saw why it had taken so long.

The personal-sized pizza had been lovingly assembled by hand on top of several large whole wheat tortillas. I'd never seen anything like it. The pizza sauce itself was a tad too sweet, but I couldn't find fault with the bounty of vegetables on top: mushrooms, spinach, bell pepper, tomatoes, olives and even broccoli. The whole wheat tortilla "pizza crust" beneath all the veggies and cheese was wonderfully crispy throughout; from edge to interior, there wasn't a trace of sogginess. It was unusual in the most fantastic way, and I enjoyed every bite of the odd little thing. I chuckled to myself as I ate it, admiring how well the "crust" reflected the Hispanic influence of the East End neighborhood, just as the owners and always cheerful employees here do: Spanish is heard as often as English, and gorgeous Latin-themed art hangs from every wall.

The brightly hued Tlaquepaque Market in which Bohemeo's is housed was built in 1929 to serve the surrounding Eastwood neighborhood, which — at the time — was considered one of the finest master planned communities in the nation. The Market eventually found itself catering to the more heavily Hispanic communities in places such as Magnolia Park, to the east.

As with many other things in the East End — from residences to businesses — the Tlaquepaque Market fell into disrepair over the decades. At one point, it was surrounded by empty houses, vacant lots and rampant drug use. In the last ten years, artists and community activists began reinvesting in the East End, reinvigorating it and breathing new life into the area. Richard Adkins, an East End resident who owns the Market, began redeveloping it in 2004. Two years later, Bohemeo's moved in and — along with tenants such as Kanomwan, a popular Thai restaurant, and the Houston Institute for Culture — the Market was alive once again.

Pinks, oranges, yellows and pops of turquoise decorate nearly every surface of the Market; it's hard to miss as you're driving down Telephone Road. But for all the dizzying colors, the patio at Bohemeo's is

one of the loveliest places to be in Houston. Next to a bubbling fountain, with a cold beer or a not-too-sweet Bo's frozen mochachino in one hand (Starbucks has nothing on these guys) and a rich brownie in the other, it's an ideal location for catching the sunset over the looming downtown skyline across the football field at Austin High School.

Desserts and coffees are almost a given at a place like Bohemeo's: sweet potato bars and lemon bars behind the counter are dizzyingly sweet but good. All of the desserts here are good, and none taste even remotely of a dank refrigerated case as happens so often elsewhere. And coffee lovers will find something to suit their palate here, whether it be a *mezcla* blend of light beans or a stronger Kenyan coffee with a slight bite to it. All cups of coffee are brewed to order, individually, so you never have to worry about getting bitter bean face here.

The Bo's fish and shrimp tacos that Bohemeo's serves are quickly becoming well known for a reason: They're truly great. As my dining companion polished off his pair of tacos that initial evening, he must have exclaimed at least three times, "I never expected this!" And who would?

The tacos — wrapped in warm, whole wheat tortillas — are filled heartily with grilled shrimp or tilapia filets, then covered with a piquant remoulade that's neither too spicy nor too bland and a fistful of crunchy red cabbage and eye-opening cilantro. Yes, it's roughly the same formula followed by most places that serve fish tacos. But at Bohemeo's, the tacos are always fat, always tasty and always surprising to anyone who thinks that a coffee shop can't make good food.

And whether you're in the mood for "quiet night" — those Monday and Tuesday nights where students are encouraged to come and study — or an open-mike night on Sundays or the occasionally raucous, always enjoyable live music that hits the stage on Thursday through Saturday, the food at Bohemeo's is as reliable as the casual, comfortable sense of community inside.

Although there were many questions when it first opened as to whether a place like Bohemeo's would survive in the East End — coffee, art, music and health food not typically being the first things that come to mind when a Houstonian thinks of Telephone Road — so far down the road, the answer seems to be a resounding yes.