
Unterman on FOOD

El Molino Central

By [Patricia Unterman](#) / July 26, 2015 / [No Comments](#)

Tall, blonde, and larger than life, Karen Taylor Waikiki seems improbable as the chef/owner of the best taco stand in Northern California, but she knows exactly what it takes to cook luscious, fully realized Mexican food. At her destination taco stand in Boyes Hot Springs on the outskirts of the town of Sonoma, she starts with the basics, masa made with organic dried corn, stone ground daily on site, for tortillas, tamales and chips. Upon these she builds a small menu of vibrantly fresh, local-ingredient-driven dishes that I personally long for whenever I feel the urge to eat Mexican. If you've ever stoically stood in the never-ending line at the Super Rica taco stand in Santa Barbara, so beloved by Julia Child, you'll understand the pull of El Molino Central. Thankfully I have yet to wait more than five minutes for the Sonoma experience.

At El Molino, the thick, super crisp chips need all their heft to scoop up guacamole (\$5.50) made of bright green avocado halves barely crushed with green chiles, cilantro and white onion. These sturdy chips, equally good dipped into green tomatillo or smoky red chipotle salsa (\$4) can easily turn into a meal by themselves.

I never liked tamales until I started eating El Molino's. Most tamales seem so bland and heavy, a chore to get through for a few spoons of filling. But the tamale masa here tastes like buttered fresh corn and is as compelling as their ample fillings—pork (\$11.50); Oaxacan chicken mole (\$12.50); or mushroom, spinach, chipotle and cheese (\$9.50). The tamales sometimes get a sauce but always a high-note topping of piquant vegetable relish.

During recent hot weather, I've been eating octopus tostadas (\$12.50), of cooked—not raw—diced octopus, provocatively chewy in a ceviche-style salsa of exactly cut tomatoes, red onions and avocado scented with a whisper of dried Mexican oregano. This cool, juicy mixture spooned onto two crisp, fried-to-order tortillas hits the summertime spot.

El Molino's fish tacos (\$9.50), battered, impeccably deep fried fingers of satiny local rock fish splashed with avocado-lime mayonnaise and a drizzle of hot salsa de arbol achieve perfect balance. Tender, warm tortillas take the fish taco to new heights. (To get anything close, you'd have to travel to Ensenada in Baja California where you're handed a tortilla with a naked log of deep fried fish which you dress yourself with thinly sliced radishes, cabbage, crema and salsa.)

El Molino elevates enchiladas (\$12), the workhorse of the Mexican-American menu, with lush fillings and sauces, using the best ingredients in every layer. Look for chicken-filled enchiladas suizas in vibrant green salsa and the sour cream that turns them “suiza,” Swiss; and chard-filled ones with tomato salsa, crema and cheese.

But the dish that really seduces me right now is chile relleno (\$13.50), a roasted and peeled medium hot green chile poblano filled with unctuous sweet corn and melted white cheese flanked by fresh tomato salsa, rice, and an incredibly delicious puree of black beans on the the side. Put a little of everything on the plate in a torn piece of tortilla and you attain nirvana—over and over.

To drink, have fresh cantaloupe aqua fresca, sweetened just enough to be fun but still be refreshing. There are good beers and respectable local wines as well.

The screen door slaps shut as you enter the colorfully painted shop. Place your order at the counter and walk through the buzzing kitchen to find a table on the small patio under a trellis at the back. You’ll get the whole picture. Cheerful Spanish speaking cooks and food runners move efficiently in cramped, immaculate quarters. They work precisely. Everyone is kind to the customers and each other, something lovely to behold.

That attitude and work ethic flows directly from the owner, someone who has traveled all over Mexico and cooked at the shrine, the authentic Mexican kitchen of Diana Kennedy. Karen strikes me as a wanderer open to adventure, a free-spirit and a consciously evolved human being. Underline “human.” Her instincts about food, people, service and generosity ennoble everything she directly or indirectly touches—not the least, those of us who make the pilgrimage to her stand.

Note: You can get a good sampling of El Molino’s dishes, plus chips, salsa, tamales and fresh tortillas to take home at Karen Taylor Waikiki’s Primavera food booth at the Ferry Plaza Farmers’ Market every Saturday.

11 Central Avenue, Sonoma. 707 939 1010 Open daily from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m.