

Eating Around the Neighborhood: Birrieria Jalisco

Roseanne Sullivan

Even if you didn't notice the goat head on the overhead sign for Birrieria, it's harder to miss another similar painting on the window to the right of the entrance door. If you pay attention you can see that the quirky painting shows a goat's head in a bowl with its tongue hanging out. I walked right by both of these rather obvious clues without noticing when I first wandered into this little restaurant on 13th Street near the graphic design shop on the corner of Taylor on a hot Sunday afternoon last summer. Perhaps because the front window is crowded with neon advertisements for Mexican beers, I had the impression that the word "birrieria" had something to do with beer.



Flavorful Goat

"Especialidad de la Casa"

The menu at the time of my first visit was only in Spanish, but even with my limited grasp of the language, I was able to figure out that the specialty of the house is a kind of goat stew, called *birria*. While I'm at it, I would like to share a related insight with all other non-Spanish speaking foodies—that a *birrieria* is a restaurant that serves birria. And the predominance of beer ads probably has something to do with the fact that birria seems to go best with beer (which in Spanish is called *cerveza*).

Don't be turned off by the idea of eating goat. If you've got an ounce of adventurousness in you, you've got to try it. You'll be glad you did.

Goat is not the only thing they serve at Birrieria Jalisco. A new very attractive menu with color illustrations was available at my most recent visit, in both English and Spanish. The menu offers Mexican dishes of many kinds to eat in or take out.

Tacos, burritos, tortas (sandwiches), soups and seafood are priced from \$2.00 on the low end for an a la carte enchilada to \$10.25 at the high end for some of the seafood dishes. “Caldo siete mares,” which can be literally translated as seven seas soup is translated non-literally as “mixed seafood soup” on the menu, and it, along with the shrimp and mixed seafood cocktails are the items at the high end of the price range.

Some important items not translated at all on the menu are the “tortilla de arina” (flour tortillas), “tortilla de maiz” (corn tortillas), and the choices for taco fillings, which include “birria” (which we all know by now means “goat”), “cabeza” (head meat), “al pastor” (lamb), “tripas” (tripe), and “pollo” (chicken).

I decided to be adventurous and try the goat stew, in the chica (small-sized) portion for \$6.75, and I liked it so much I ordered it again the second time I went back. The generous serving of meat in a good sized bowl is tender and the broth is intensely savory.

The birria sauce is typically a blend of many flavorings, with some regional variations: garlic, one or several types of chiles, tomato,

bay leaves, fresh ginger, marjoram, and oregano. Like the best of similar meat dishes the world over, birria includes vinegar or fruit juices, or a combination of vinegar and fruit juices, which provide a needed edge to cut through the richness of the meat.¹ The chiles don't make the dish hot; they add dimension to it. The tenderness of the meat is due in large part from its being marinated in the sauce before long slow cooking.

Birria is served with hot fresh corn tortillas wrapped in a cloth in a plastic basket and with a condiments rack containing bowls of chopped onion, cilantro, and cut-up lemons. You can add the condiments to the stew to suit your taste.



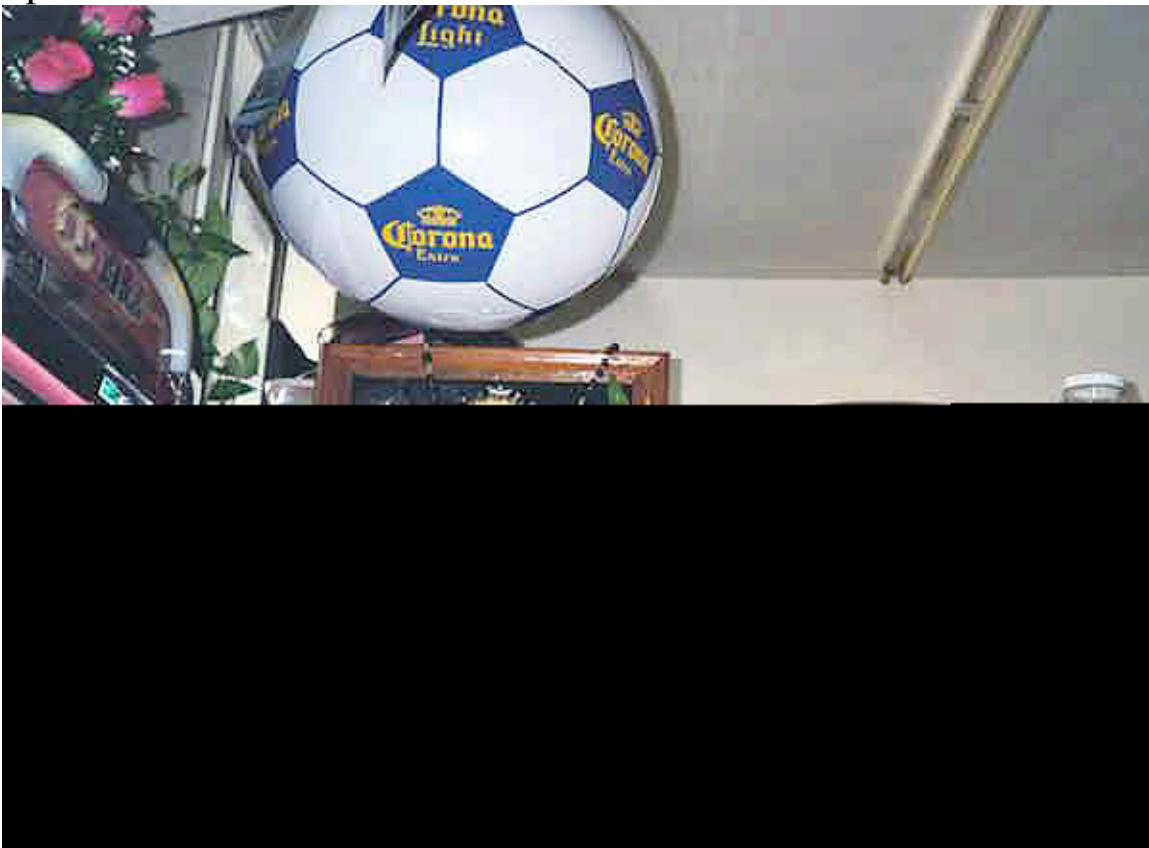
Bebidas (beverages) range from milk, to “aguas frescas”: tamarind

¹ Think of Pho, the Vietnamese soup that comes with rui, a basil-like herb, fresh bean sprouts, and lime or lemon wedges. Or Chinese sweet and sour soup. One of my favorite lentil soups includes ground beef with the juice of a lime squeezed into it, and the lime lifts the rich taste of the legumes and meat into a lighter, higher plane.

and the delicious cinnamon flavored rice drink called horchata (pronounced “orchata”). You can also get domestic and Mexican sodas and beers. Deserts include rice pudding (arroz con lecho), flan (Spanish-style custard), and gelatinas (gelatin deserts) for \$2.50.

The first time I went, I was the only Anglo there. The wait staff speaks little English, but if you don't speak Spanish, you can point at the menu to let them know what you want. To get the check, try saying, "La cuenta por favor"(Lah quaint-ah pour fahv-oar).

A few words about the decor. A picture of Santa Maria de la Purification draped with a super sized black rosary, and a prayer to San Martin Caballero, popular patron saint of businesses in Mexico, are on the counter that separates the cooking area from the tables. An inflated beachball sized mock up of a soccer ball advertising Corona beer hangs from the ceiling near the juke box, and small flags hang over the tables advertising Pacifico. The juke box has a large selection in Spanish.



My first time, the place was very crowded with families there for Sunday dinner after church, and the room was hot in the early afternoon sun. The eight tables were full and there was a wait for a seat, but the energy was good, and the flavor of the goat stew when it arrived made the meal unforgettable for all the best reasons. The restaurant was much less crowded when I returned this Spring on a late Saturday afternoon to talk over northside news and this article with editor Don Gagliardi, and the birria was still very very good.

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Birrieria Jalisco

693 North 13th Street

San Jose, CA 95112

(408)288-9437

Orders to go or eat in.

Food: Specialty, goat. Also features seafood and other Mexican dishes.

Ambience: Narrow, eight-tables, basic small Mexican restaurant where real people eat, with authentic good food at reasonable prices.

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"Eating around the neighborhood" will be back in future issues with reviews of other local eateries. Roseanne Sullivan is a writer and artist who has been a Northside resident for three years. She is pleased that this neighborhood has all kinds of amenities you don't find in the suburbs, such as restaurants within walking distance, not to mention sidewalks. Contact her with leads at: roseannesullivan@sbcglobal.net.