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FOOD

Gas station eats worth filling up on

By Keren Engelberg
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When you think of a gas station, perhaps the last thing you think of is good food. But dining in L.A. is often surprising, so why not have a meal at your local 76 or Chevron? Turns out that inside more than a few inconspicuous minimarts, you can find much more than sweaty heat-lamp cheese dogs, and often at an affordable price. Think fresh potato samosas, enchilada sauce-dipped tortas, and broasted chicken and potatoes that are worth licking your fingers for. Here are some spots where you won't want to just pay at the pump.

Ammi's Samosas

"We sell Lotto and samosas," one Woodland Hills gas station sign proclaims. That and another little sign for "Ammi's Samosas" are the only hints you'll find that there's more to this gas station than meets the eye. At the corner of DeSoto Avenue and Ventura Boulevard, this Chevron is one of 10 stations, most in Woodland Hills, that sells these addictive Indian snacks. The woman responsible for them, Amarjit Mac, is also co-owner of these stations and 30 others, with her husband, Bhupinder. Mac preps the samosas weekly in their Santa Monica gas station kitchen, cooking the fillings, then stuffing and freezing the samosas to be fried later. Two of the Woodland Hills stations fry small batches every day throughout the day, according to demand, and distribute to the other locations. In other words, the samosa you find sitting in the warmer is pretty fresh.

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Mac, who is northern Indian but grew up in Kenya, uses her family's recipe, though she has toned down the heat level to suit her patron's tastes. The heavy, plump triangles, filled with ground beef or potato, still have quite a kick, dense with the flavors of ginger, garlic, chiles and cilantro. Customers can choose between cool mint or tamarind chutney as a condiment. At $1.83 each, order one of everything, then mix, match, and repeat. *Chevron, 20905 Ventura Blvd., Woodland Hills, (818) 999-9495.*

Chevron Grill

Once you start looking for them, you'll find a surprising number of minimart Mexican grills. Past the Slim Jims and candy aisles, the counter is typically located at the back of the store. Sometimes there are tables and chairs, sometimes not. At Chevron Grill, you do get the tables and chairs, and you also get a particularly good interpretation of the genre. Perfectly salty, with just the right ratio of soft meat to crispy bits, the carnitas stand out. Also try the carne asada and the al pastor. Order them as tacos ($1.40 each) to try them all, and to take advantage of the salsa bar, which has the mild tomatillo and spicy roja you'd expect, but also spicy pickled carrots and pickled red onions. Served on double discs of warm corn tortillas, top them as you like and dig in. Mornings call for a breakfast burrito, or as regulars refer to it, the GSB (Gas Station Burrito, of course). *Chevron, 22756 Vanowen Street, West Hills, (818) 716-1549.*

Taco Express

Just a 20-minute drive from Chevron Grill, another taqueria hides in plain sight, in yes, another Chevron station minimart on the south side of Ventura Boulevard in Tarzana. Taco Express feels like more of a gamble when you walk in, thanks to a large food warming case that greets you front and center. Look past it and order something from the *plancha*. Lamb, beef tongue and carne asada tortas ($7.99) as big as your head are all popular, as is the literal head—the *cabeza*—which sells out quickly. The pastor is not cooked on a traditional *trompo*, but it's marinated in *chile guajillo*, paprika and cumin, and roasted with the requisite onions and pineapple. A little chopped onion and wonderfully tangy avocado salsa on that taco ($2.99), and you're in business. *Chevron, 19156 Ventura Blvd., Tarzana, (818) 345-5553.*

Cilantro Mexican Grill

Almost in a category of its own, Cilantro Mexican Grill goes way beyond the taco stand. Its menu is surprisingly ambitious—not just for gas station food, but for a fast-casual restaurant, which is closer to what it really is. Before coming on as chef at Cilantro, Adolfo Perez studied at Le Cordon Bleu Pasadena and worked in the kitchens of the Cheesecake Factory and Hamburger Hamlet. The dipped steak torta ($7) is much like a traditional torta sandwich, but with the added flourishes of two sauces inside (cilantro pesto and chipotle ranch), and a pool of warm, smoky enchilada sauce underneath. The tacos also get special treatment. From beef barbacoa to fresh grilled shrimp (yep, in a gas station) you can customize pretty much any order. That means even tacos (starting at $1.95) can have toppings like calabacitas or roasted corn salad, in addition to the more expected salsas and sour cream. Even the aguas frescas are a surprise, as on a recent visit when offerings included watermelon and an almost herbaceous spinach variety. *Chevron, 7214 Whitsett Ave., North Hollywood, (818) 765-7998, cilantromexican.com.*

Mrs. Sippee

Originally called Mr. Sippee, back before it could boast L.A. Live and Staples Center as its neighbors, this Los Angeles institution of more than 35 years has changed ownership, but thankfully not its broasted chicken and hand-cut mojo potato recipes. These days they're even on GrubHub, but you can still grab a parking spot at the 76 station and walk into the graffiti art–covered minimart to place your order and eat at the counter. The chicken is dredged in a proprietary mix of flour and spices, then cooked in a Broaster (a patented pressure fryer). The well-seasoned skin is savory, brown, nice and crusty; and the inside perfectly juicy. Accompanying potato wedges are given essentially the same treatment, to great results. For $4.99, you get three chicken legs, spuds and a side of Louisiana hot sauce. Sippee also makes a good burger. The ribs are popular as well. But you're here for the chicken. *76, 1045 Blaine St., Los Angeles, (213) 748-1612.*

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