

ROCKIN' TACO VS. BIG STAR IN THE CLASH OF TORTILLAS



Jam Session

By Michael Nagrant

JOHNNY CASH WAS GIVIN' ME THE MIDDLE FINGER. So it goes at Lakeview's Rockin' Taco, where posters of rock gods, including a squinty-eyed Bob Marley smoking a fatty blunt, an impossibly youthful Clash slumming in an alley, and a pissed-off Man in Black giving the big eff-you to the camera, hang near the cash register. I thought it was a metaphor. I thought everything was.

After the Beatles vs. Stones, there is maybe no more prevalent turntable-side discussion than The Clash vs. The Jam. And those who pick The Clash, at least to those born in America (for Brits have generally always derided The Jam as unserious popsters—probably spot on when you consider the Motownesque backbeat of a “Town Called Malice”) and subject to the overwhelming popularity of “Rock the Casbah,” are sometimes regarded as pop-swayed dilettantes. American Jam fans tend to be argumentative types who appreciate (or pretend to) their driving-though-less-hooky singles like “Eaton Rifles.” Of course, those who argue too vehemently about these things sometimes still live in their parent's basements.

So, yes, of course, Rockin' Taco with its dingy shiny head-shop-stereotype posters and cheesy big-screen-television-clad dining room was all about the friendlier Clash. I mean, c'mon, they serve hot dogs and tofu tacos. They have a special called the Friday Night Fight where if you polish off ten ghost pepper (hottest pepper in the world) hot-sauced tacos in an hour, with only one drink and one napkin to save you, you get a t-shirt, a picture on their wall and “eternal glory.” Hell, it wasn't just Johnny Cash. The whole idea of this place was giving me the middle finger.

Having read about the rock theme and tofu and having imagined some late-night Jaeger-bombed-out Ed Hardy t-shirt-wearing dude vomiting on me, I decided to stop by Wicker Park's Big Star for a couple tacos before heading over to Rockin' Taco. One, I figured it would be good to get a baseline read from one of my favorite local, also loosely themed, taco joints—the theme being: how many dudes wearing 1993 New Trier High School tennis team t-shirts cribbed from Unique Thrift can we attract—and also to hedge my bets and make sure I was well fed if Rockin' Taco didn't work out.

It seemed like a no-brainer. Big Star, with its hand-patted freshly griddled tortillas, made by weathered Latino ladies and filled with luscious glistening fatty chunks of pork belly along with its oozy bubbling crocks of queso fundido, generally got me more revved up than a daydream about a naked Scarlett Johansson hand-feeding me maple-syrup-glazed foie gras wrapped in bacon in bed.

But, this time (which was no reflection of my previous experience), the panza (pork belly), the al pastor and the chivo (goat) tacos were lacking salt. Even the usually heavenly corn-perfumed tortillas were a tad dry. The thing about Big Star, however, is the thoughtful balance of ingredients, including the smoky sweet grilled pineapple tidbits in the pastor and the grill-singed bits of scallion, peppery and translucent rounds of radish girding the succulent sweet spiced goat go a long way. In this substandard state, Big Star could still put most taquerias in town out of business. Though not, it turns out, Rockin' Taco.

Despite the lack of a spit, the tendril licks of the grill flame at Rockin' Taco yielded a well-salted al pastor that was succulent and nicely charred. The beef on their taco asada however was a dry chewy mess, probably from spending too much time in the unforgiving acid of a papaya marinade. All was redeemed with the tofu taco, marinated in al pastor spices and tinged with a tangy pineapple zing as satisfying as the similar accompaniment on Big Star's regular al-pastor. The creamy bits of spicy tofu aped a fresh Indian-style paneer, and after a few bites, I was convinced it was the best taco I'd had all week. Flautas, especially the crispy fried-cheddar-potato-stuffed ones which reminded me of my Polish grandmother's excellent pierogi filling were also pretty addictive. Almost as delightful as the food was owner Robert Vojnovich working the room, busing tables, and making sure everyone's having a good time.

Paul Kahan—executive chef and partner in Big Star is so damn big and so well-loved these days, he and Big Star are very much the taqueria equivalent of the Clash. His past ventures Blackbird, Avec and The Publican are like “London Calling”-sized restaurant hits, regarded, certainly for quality, but also for their accessible populist ways. I don't know if Rockin' Taco's big enough, or ever will be, to serve as a taqueria analog to The Jam. But their tofu al pastor, for me, was like the perfect pop song, the taco equivalent of the jangly George Harrisonesque acoustic work on The Jam's “That's Entertainment.”

Big Star, 1531 North Damen, (773)252-7767; Rockin' Taco, 1467 West Irving Park, (773)975-8226.

= NEW

Caspa/Smart Bar

Christian Varela, Tim Baker/Smart Bar

Pezznor/Smart Bar

→RECOMMENDED

Selected club listings and previews appear below. To submit listings e-mail musical@newcity.com; listings must be received two weeks prior to the publication date for the issue in which you want them to appear. We do not guarantee that all submitted listings will appear in print. For expanded listings, visit music.newcity.com

THU/25

Abstract Science and Dubfix

With Caspa, Chris Widman, Phaded and special guest MC Zulu. Smart Bar, 10pm, \$12 before midnight, \$15 after.

Baio, Kid Color

Beauty Bar, 10pm, \$5.

ButtaSoftSol

With DJ Mark Fulla Flava. Butterfly Social Club, 9pm, No cover.

→Caspa

2009 was a banner year for Caspa, West London's dubstep ambassador. His debut album was well-received and his residency at Fabric is an enduring success. He recently added new artists to his labels (Storming, Sub Soldiers and Dub Police) and somehow manages the increased demand for his remix skills between tour dates. His 2009 schedule left Caspa with little time to visit the studio, but fans were rewarded early this month with Fabric's release of “I Beat my Robot” and an Original Sin remix of “Marmite.” Abstract Science and Dubfix lure him back to Chicago for a night of uncompromising basslines layered with elements of hip-hop and R&B. (John Alex Colon) Smart Bar, 3730 North Clark, (773)549-0203.

DJ Patman

Excalibur (main floor), 10pm-4am

Spybar Thursdays

With DJs JJ Flores and Steve Smooth. Spy Bar, 10pm-4am.

Jack Yo Body

Empire Liquors, 10pm, No cover.

The Screamin' End – jump blues/roots rock

Green Dolphin Street, 8pm-11pm, \$5 advance, \$10 at the door.

Tropical Thursdays

Hosted by Latin Street Dancing. Excalibur Nightclub (upstairs, Club X), 7pm-4am, Free with R.S.V.P.

FRI/26

Bad Boys of Live Late Night

Excalibur (Main Floor in the Cabaret), 7pm-4am.

Dino G Presents...

Different DJ each week. Spy Bar, 10pm.

DJ Hiroki

Empire Liquors, 10pm-2am, No cover.

Free2Be

Featuring DJs Jpaz, Hammurabi, Word, Mark Fullaflava. Funky Buddha Lounge, 9pm.

Just Dance Fridays

Featuring Top 40, Hip-hop, Reggaeton. Crobar, 9pm.

CLUB VENUES

Beauty Bar

1444 W. Chicago, beautybar.com

Berlin

954 W. Belmont, (773)348-4975, berlinchicago.com

Butterfly Social Club

722 W. Grand, (312)666-1695, funkybuddha.com

Crobar

1543 N. Kingsbury, (312)266-1900, crobar.com

Danny's Tavern

1951 W. Dickens, (773)489-6457

Debonair Social Club

1575 N. Milwaukee, (773)227-7990, debonairsocialclub.com

Empire Liquors

1566 N. Milwaukee, (773)278-1600, empireliquors.com

Excalibur

640 N. Dearborn, (312)266-1944, excaliburchicago.com

Funky Buddha Lounge

728 W. Grand, (312)666-1695, funkybuddha.com

Green Dolphin Street

2200 N. Ashland, (773)395-0066, jazzitup.com

Hideout

1354 W. Wabansia, (773)227-4433, hideoutchicago.com

Lumen

839 W. Fulton Market, (312)733-2222, lumen-chicago.com

Rednofive

440 N. Halsted, (312)733-6699, rednofive.com

Smart Bar

3730 N. Clark, (773)549-0203, smartbarchicago.com

Sound-Bar

226 W. Ontario, (312)787-4480, sound-bar.com

Spy Bar

646 N. Franklin, (312)587-8779, spyardchicago.com

Vision

632 N. Dearborn, (312)266-1944, visionnightclub.com

Zentra

923 W. Weed, (312)787-0400, zentranightclub

One Love

With DJ Papa G. Butterfly Social Club, 10pm-2am, No cover.

→Pezznor, Johnny Fiasco, Fortune

With the ever-present popularity of pseudonyms, group names, side projects and team-ups in dance music, there always seems to be some unknown talent waiting to bubble up to the surface and make a name for himself. Take, for example, Dave Pezzner, half of the funky, unpredictable duo behind underground favorites Jacob London (alongside Bob Hansen)—best

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