

MINI-REVIEW



Velvet Taco

1110 N. State St. 312-763-2654

Already hot

no joke

THE GOLD COAST'S NEW LATE-NIGHT TAQUERIA IS FULL OF SURPRISES



Chicken tikka taco and annatto pork taco
PHILIP DEMBINSKI PHOTOS FOR REDEYE

Late-night eats

Velvet Taco is open until 2 a.m. Sunday through Thursday and 4 a.m. Friday and Saturday.

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

Tacos for bros! I figured that might as well be the motto at Velvet Taco, a late-night taqueria that opened earlier this month in the Gold Coast. The folks behind this Texas import (other locations are in Dallas and Fort Worth) clearly have a fondness for frathouse-worthy double entendres. There's the WTF taco (weekly taco feature), "backdoor" rotisserie chicken and, of course, the free stickers that say "I eat out Velvet Taco."

Believe it or not, the name actually isn't rooted in innuendo. "We knew we needed 'taco' in the name, so the next question was what was the leading word to best describe what we were all about," executive chef John Franke said. "The word velvet came up because it reminds you of something clean, sleek, smooth, retro, eclectic and cool. We wanted a name that reflected our eclectic style and feel." Considering its Viagra Triangle location just stumbling distance from the touristy, party-hard bars along Division Street, I stopped by to see if it was stylish or just a drunk food stop.

The scene

Velvet Taco is rocking the factory-chic look pretty hard, from the reclaimed wood tables to the industrial pendant lights and worn wood tables. My table neighbors were not, in fact, club-going dudes, but a sweater-clad professorial type and an older woman toting her tiny dog inside her designer handbag. Tacos for the eclectic was more like it.

The tacos

Velvet Taco is not focusing on souped-up Mexican classics like gourmet taco shops such as Kokopelli or Antique Taco. Sure, there are excellent Mexican-inspired tacos on offer, such as annatto shredded pork tossed with grilled pineapple bits, all drizzled with avocado crema and sprinkled with zippy neon-pink pickled onions swaddled in a fresh-griddled housemade tortilla (\$3.75). Most of the tacos on offer feature funky fillings that sound gimmicky but were actually delicious.

A juicy chicken tikka taco with spicy, buttery tomato sauce, cilantro-flecked basmati rice and yogurt raita was as good as any Indian takeout in the city. A flaky fried cod taco smeared with pungent curry, malted fries and frilly pea tendrils (\$5.25) was like English pub-worthy fish and chips on a tortilla. Best of all was the bacon burger (\$3.75), reminiscent of a Big Mac in taco form, though the meat is not processed, dry and pressed as on a Big Mac, but ground, juicy and smoky. It dripped with melted shreds of American cheese, pungent sweet onion and Velvet sauce, a mayo and ketchup based riff on

McDonald's special sauce.

Fusion cooking is usually a recipe for confusion, but at Velvet Taco there is a clear well-executed idea of from-scratch melting pot cooking. I'm drooling right now just thinking about returning. "My goal is that every time you take a bit of a different taco you get a different sense memory. Like, hey, that reminds me of a great backyard burger, and oh, this one reminds me of something I ate at a great Middle-Eastern joint. Ultimately we wanted to create a place with high quality food that didn't cost \$30 or require you to dress up or use a knife and a fork." Mission accomplished.



Frozen margarita

The drinks

One of the cooler discoveries at Velvet Taco was the soda fountain, which purveys a selection of cane sugar-based pop from Excel Bottling of Breese, Ill. According to Franke, they found the company through Texas soda purveyor Dublin Bottling Works, which used to supply the (now discontinued) cane sugar-based Dublin Dr. Pepper. My favorite flavor was black cherry, which tasted like a mash-up of cream soda and cherry Coke (\$2.50). There's also a Slurpee-smooth frozen lime margarita (\$6.50), that, if it weren't for open container laws, I'd love to stroll around the Gold Coast sipping this summer.

Bottom line

Velvet Taco isn't another drunk food stop, but rather a thoughtful restaurant doling out well-executed Indian, American, Cuban, Asian and Middle-Eastern staples that just happen to be served on a tortilla. **REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE.** REDEYE@REDEYETCHICAGO.COM | @REDEYEATDRINK