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# La Plaza Taqueria y Carniceria

*Real Mexican Street Food in the Heart of Auburn*

WORDS **REBECCA TREON** PHOTOS **BECCA BEERS**

When Jesús Santillanes and his sister Azucena first opened La Plaza Taqueria y Carniceria in Auburn, most of their customers were Latino. Immigrants from Mexico, the duo was cooking something the rest of the college town residents weren't necessarily familiar with yet: authentic Mexican street tacos, served straight up with cilantro, diced white onions, sliced radishes and a wedge of lime.

Word on the street got out, though, and today La Plaza is one of the most beloved dining spots among Auburnites from every background.

La Plaza is a counter-service taqueria on one side and a Mexican-style butcher and market on the other. The Santillanes siblings took inspiration for the concept from their hometown of Tepehuanes, Durango, a mountainous state in northern Mexico. (A mural of Tepehuanes' main plaza is on the wall in La Plaza.)

They moved to Auburn in 2002 to join family who were already living in Opelika and began working at a popular Tex-Mex restaurant. But after a few years started to dream about opening their own place.

"We thought that if people are enjoying Tex-Mex-style food, why not open a place that serves authentic tacos, the real food of Mexico?" Jesús says.

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In addition to street tacos, La Plaza serves other handheld bites such as sopes (puffy tortillas topped with meat and cheese) and tortas (sandwiches). They offer a variety of meats to fill them, from the familiar chorizo (Mexican sausage) and carnitas (pork) to butcher-shop offal such as lengua (beef tongue) and tripa (tripe).

The recipes all come from the kitchen of their mother, Maria Cristina—in fact, she works side by side at the restaurants with her children. "She taught us the recipes for everything we make," Jesús says.

They have a salsa bar, just like those you'd find at most taco stands in Mexico, with a variety of homemade sauces such as green tomatillo, pico de gallo and habanero. And you can cool off with glass-bottled Mexican sodas such as Fanta and Jarritos, plus beers such as Modelo and Corona.

La Plaza and its sister restaurant, Carniceria y Taqueria Durango, have proved so popular that plans are in the works for a third iteration of the concept. Called La Fiesta, the Santillanes family says to look for an opening date in November or December. Because as it turns out, Auburn's diverse residents are hungry for real Mexican food; they just needed La Plaza to show them what it really tasted like.

*La Plaza Taqueria y Carniceria: 1629 S. College St., Auburn; 334-466-4975*



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