

GORDO'S CANTINA

WORDS DANIEL SCHEFFLER PHOTOS ED LEFKOWICZ



Gordo's Cantina used to just pop up. Eventually, owner JR Savage had enough of all that popping and after about two years of building up a loyal clientele, he opened his first storefront in November, opting for a Long Island City location, which he found more compelling than trendy Manhattan.

"People are coming to the borough for more space, to support brick and mortars, a better way of life financially and for a unique sense of neighborhood," said Savage, who cut his teeth in nightlife at the Griffin and Bar Nine. "It is also where the foodie industry is now actually setting up shop."

And so this popular central Mexican street food brand found the perfect spot a moment away from Queens Plaza—right next to the train's rising metal tracks.

Savage didn't want Gordo's Cantina (named after his 7-year-old French bulldog) to do just average Mexican food. Inspired by his girlfriend's Mexican heritage, Savage's menu goes beyond the taco (though taco offerings like the tiger shrimp "Gobernador" and a Menonita cheese fondue are nothing to scoff at). He serves up a bacon-wrapped Mexican hot dog christened the "el chapo" (Spanish for "shorty") that comes topped with pico de gallo and drizzled with house-made crema, and crowd-pleasing open-faced quesadillas (the better way to eat them).

If you're looking for a real treat, show up on a Tuesday, the only day the salpicon tostada is available. It's a tostada topped with slow-roasted short rib served on a bed of guajillo beans, avocado and Oaxaca cheese.

Savage uses simple and fresh ingredients, and says most people don't realize the time and preparation that goes into his dishes. "Compared to other Mexican food in New

York, we enhance the flavors and ingredients. We do not add overpowering marinades or extra ingredients that take away the focus of the dish. We keep it as close as we can to what it tastes like in Mexico, that 'clean' taste."

So beyond the succulent meats and unique street foods, what keeps the regulars coming? It's for the jollity element (and perhaps the secret menu that only regulars are privy to). With its red-tiled floors, Mexican flea market-sourced baubles strewn about and wrought-iron-accented furniture, the cozy space feels a little industrial, a little whimsical and not at all pretentious. Guests can walk in, find a mismatched vintage metal chair and watch the kitchen prepare its charm. Or get topped off with some horchata. It's the Mexican way. ☕

> *Gordo's Cantina: 24–11 Queens Plaza N., Long Island City; 646.828.6758*

