



Lisa Carmack

SAN FRANCISCO RESTAURANT OPENINGS

## A New Pop-Up Brings Buzzy, Michelin-Pedigreed Tacos and Arepas to Castro Valley

Hermanos Verdes is slinging fun, boldly modern Venezuelan and Mexican dishes in the East Bay suburbs

by Luke Tsai | Jan 13, 2021, 9:30am PST

In Castro Valley, local lore has it that the census-designated East Bay community was once listed in the *Guinness Book of World Records* for having the "most fast food restaurants located in a one-mile strip." That title seems to be mostly apocryphal, but the point stands: According to chef Mikey Ochoa, a Castro Valley native who previously cooked at Michelin-starred spots like Lazy Bear and Rich Table in San Francisco, this particular stretch of the East Bay suburbs has never really been a destination for buzzy, ambitious restaurants.

That helps to account for the excitement around Ochoa's mostly Mexican pop-up, Hermanos Verdes, which has drawn huge crowds since the chef first started dishing out plates of pork chile verde at the old Hayward Castro Valley Moose Lodge in October.

Now, Hermanos Verdes is ready to take things to the next level: Ochoa has teamed up with fellow fine-dining escapee Gustavo Villarroel (SPQR), whose previous project, Tavo's Joint, specialized in Venezuelan arepas. Along with a third chef, Christian Caguiat, they'll relaunch the pop-up on Friday, January 15, with a new menu that combines the chefs' respective Mexican and Venezuelan backgrounds to create a slate of dishes they're so excited about, Villarroel says, it's "bordering on ridiculous, honestly" — pork chile verde and barbacoa tacos, the sweet corn pancakes known as cachapas, and a Mexican take on congee.



Chefs Mikey Ochoa (left) and Gustavo VIIarroel | Brian Bassard

**RELATED** 

## SF Pop-Up Explores the Intersection of Venezuelan and Ghanaian Food

The timing was right to join forces: Ochoa had started the earliest, informal version of the pop-up out of his apartment after he was laid off from his job as a corporate chef at LinkedIn back in June, serving just that one dish — the pork chile verde. By the end of the year, though, he'd been popping up out of the Moose Lodge's commercial kitchen for a few months already — he felt ready to flesh out the menu so that it offered more of a complete restaurant experience, even if only for takeout.

As for Villarroel, his Tavo's Joint pop-up in SoMa had wound down by the end of the year. Business had started picking up, he says, but he was still losing too much money to feel comfortable locking himself into a lease. Beyond that, because Villarroel was cooking traditional Venezuelan food, his parents were the ones he'd tapped to help out — and he didn't want to keep burdening them with that responsibility in the long term. He and Ochoa had worked together years ago at a hotel kitchen in Fremont, and after the two collaborated on a successful Venezuelan-Mexican pop-up in November, they were just excited to continue working together.

"All of the food was so good, we were just sitting there giggling," Villarroel says. "And we were like, 'We should just do this."



Beef barbacoa tacos with Mexican "kimchi" | Brian Bassard



Abuela's Smores | Brian Bassard

The new menu they've put together isn't fusion food, exactly, but it's mostly made up of border-straddling dishes that aren't strictly traditional, with little modern touches that nod to the chefs' fine dining background — "Latin-inspired" is the term Ochoa uses. So, for starters, there will be tacos, all served on handmade tortillas: one option will be Ochoa's lush, slow-cooked chile verde; another will be beef barbacoa topped with Mexican "kimchi" of sorts — made with baby shrimp, green achiote paste, and other Mexican spices — will be another. For vegans, there's jackfruit tinga and, for dessert, "Abuela's Smores" — a vegan speculoos cookie topped with vegan marshmallows and spiced chocolate.



Spanish rice congee | Brian Bassard



Breakfast arepa | Brian Bassard

Many of the most interesting dishes will be reserved for the Saturday brunch menu. The chefs take orange-tinted Spanish rice, the well-seasoned kind like you'd get at any reputable Mexican spot, except they turn it into a kind of congee, topping the bowl with fajita-style grilled vegetables. Villarroel makes a

version of a cachapa, the sweet corn pancake traditionally eaten for breakfast in Venezuela, that's stuffed with ham and cheese — "my most nostalgic dish," as he puts it.

The brunch menu is also where you'll find the only arepa on offer — a breakfast version with bacon, eggs, and shredded cheese. Villarroel says he won't put the more traditional arepas he was known for at Tavo's Joint on the regular menu at Hermanos Verdes, but he does plan on hosting occasional Tavo's Joint popups at the Castro Valley space, maybe once every couple of months.

The chefs say they're excited to bring their style of cooking to the Hayward-Castro Valley area, which Ochoa describes as a "diamond in the rough" situation. Even prior to the menu revamp, he says, it had been a lot of locals in their 20s and 30s who had been coming out to Hermanos Verdes each week — folks who would be surprised to see a buzzy pop-up taking root in what is often thought of as a "sleeping town," not known for its entertainment options. Customers' typical reaction, he says, was often, "Whoa, what the heck? This is super tight."

Hermanos Verdes pops up at the Hayward Castro Valley Moose Lodge at 20835 Rutledge Road in Castro Valley starting on Friday, January 15. For now, the pop-up will be open Thursday–Friday, 11 a.m. to 8 p.m., and Saturday 9 a.m.–8 p.m. Customers can walk up or order in advance online. See the full menu below:

