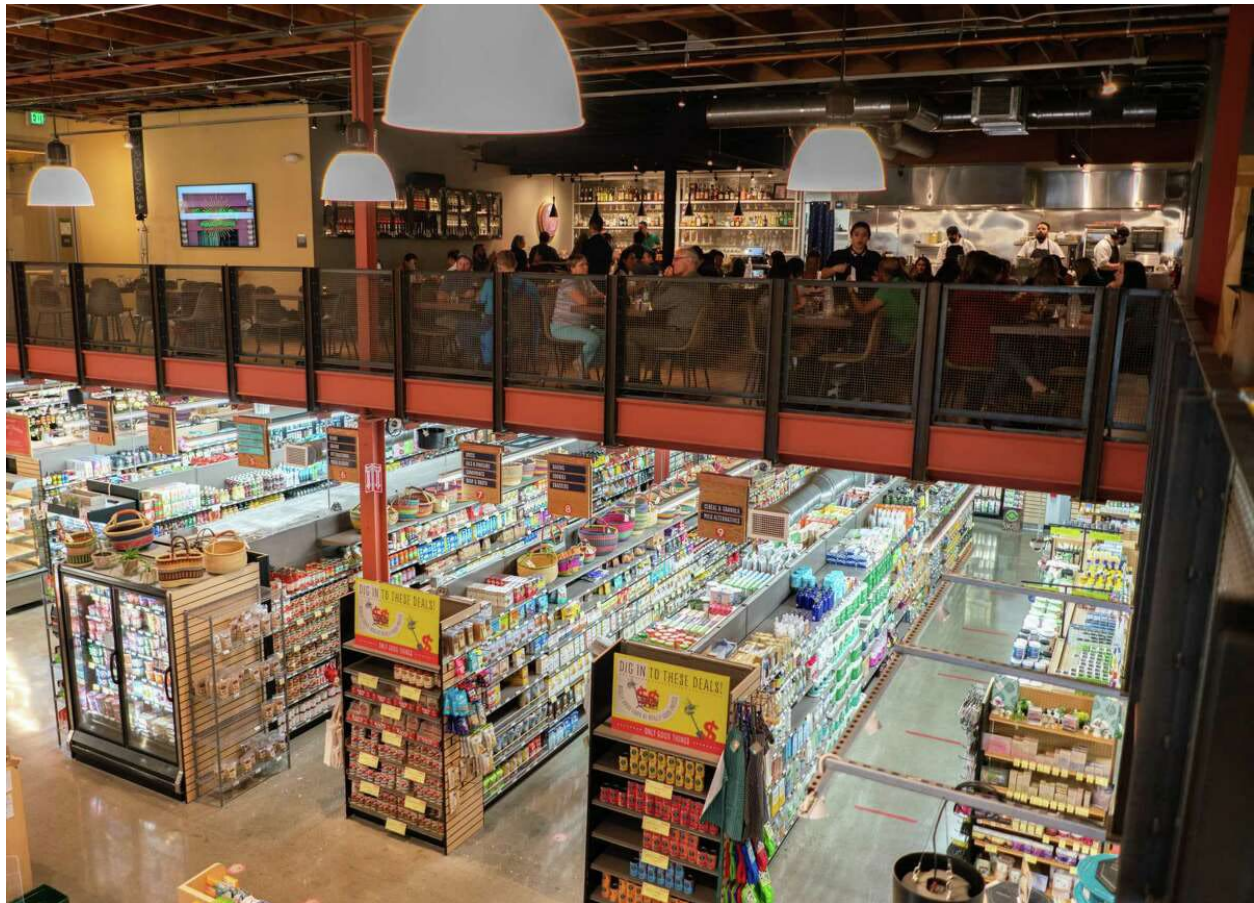


The Bay Area's best roast chicken may be hidden above a suburban grocery store

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Located above the busy Castro Valley Marketplace, Oculto offers a sublime dining experience in the East Bay city.

Don Feria/Special to The Chronicle

Usually when I order roast chicken at a restaurant, I half expect someone to come out and laugh at me. But that's not the case at Castro Valley restaurant Oculto. As soon as you sit down, put in your order for the chicken, because just as at cult-favorite Zuni Cafe in San Francisco, it can take a while.

Once it lands on your table — a glamorous half bird (\$38) with its crackly browned skin shimmering from salsa macha and butter — you feel like you earned it after your lengthy wait. The chicken sits in a pool of emerald-colored cilantro zhoug, meant to balance the bird's richer qualities through acid and chiles. Cutting into the breast expels its savory, juicy essence. Slather each bite in the herby, spicy zhoug for optimal results.

It's a chicken that makes you believe in the supernatural.

Chef and owner Mikey Ochoa wants to cook only food that he wants to eat. On a phone call, we talked about the culinary marvel of the Pizookie, a pizza-shaped cookie from national chain BJ's. The inspiration for Ochoa's chicken comes from a similar place. He loves the utility of grocery store rotisserie chicken and wanted to put his own spin on it. Most of the menu has a similar vibe, kind of like the dream version of something you'd cook at home in a moment of paranormal inspiration.

To start your meal at Oculto, a bowl of seasoned black beans and plantain chips (\$10) opens up the appetite with simplicity. The dish is a typical Venezuelan snack and comes from executive chef Gus Villarroel. Add an order of pickled veggies (\$8) to cut through the cumin-tinged beans. The pickles — briny, salty jicama or sweet and sour daikon — keep the meal centered, especially once you get to the fried plates.

Brussels sprouts (\$13) are fried until the outer leaves are deeply caramelized and crispy. Balanced with sweetness, tang and salt with the help of tamarind, esquite-inspired corn aioli and sodium-packed cotija cheese, the buds enter the cosmos.



The must-order half chicken al carbon glistens at Oculito in Castro Valley.
Don Feria/Special to The Chronicle

The papas bravas (\$14), meanwhile, live in a different pocket of the universe but are grounded in nostalgia. The dish is essentially loaded potatoes, but with a more regal construction, consisting of crunchy marble potatoes topped with mild pasilla peppers and a creamy onion sauce — all held in place by sticky, melted Oaxaca cheese. A nibble of pickles will bring you back to earth.



Papas bravas gets its kick from pasilla peppers at Oculito in Castro Valley.
Don Feria/Special to The Chronicle

Even the restaurant's location has personal significance for Ochoa, who grew up in Castro Valley and resides in Hayward. The name Oculito, Spanish for hidden,

"Oculito" also has another meaning: occult, or supernatural, and that's partly a nod to Ochoa's background playing in hard-core bands. None of that really factors into the restaurant, but there is something strange about it. It's on the mezzanine of a food hall, the Castro Valley Marketplace. In order to get to it, you have to take the stairs on the west side of the building, then make a sharp right. The dining space has a full view of the vendors below, which makes it an unassuming but slightly clunky dining experience. Oculito inherits the industrial look of the market, with exposed ceilings and steel beams throughout.

Oculito is Ochoa's first restaurant. His pop-up *Hermanos Verdes*, also in Castro Valley, served food with a similar flair, but only to go. While it was a creative outlet, he's long had his eyes set on a sit-down restaurant experience.

Having a full kitchen space let him stretch his legs creatively. Most of the menu shows a particular fascination with vegetables. Ochoa religiously reads Jeremy Fox’s book “On Vegetables” every day, and pays homage to the chef with his mole anaranjado (\$29). I wouldn’t rank it above the glorious chicken, but I appreciate art when I see it.



Mole anaranjado gets its vibrant color from heirloom carrots at Oculito in Castro Valley.
Don Feria/Special to The Chronicle

The exuberant orange mole derives its hue almost entirely from carrots. Its sweetness also comes from the vegetable, but it’s brightened further with mangos, preserved kumquats, blood orange olive oil and 97% dark chocolate. It’s a lustrous, spiced sauce reminiscent of pumpkin, creating a vivacious bed for

carrots, kohlrabi, broccoli and mint. It's served with a side of well-salted Masienda tortillas to tie it all together. Slather the radiant orange mole on the tortillas and let the sharp corn take you from an ethereal realm back to reality.

Oculto's beverage program feels a bit pedestrian compared to the food. His initial cocktail collaborator Night Owl comes from a nightclub background and served drinks — like a sweet, mangonada-inspired cocktail rimmed with store-bought chamoy — more suitable for a Mexican sports bar. That didn't meet Ochoa's vision, so his crew is taking over the beverage program. Currently Oculito offers only a limited menu of beer, wine and simple cocktails, while new staff is hired and trained.



Chef and co-owner Mikey Ochoa hopes to find a new space for his first restaurant, Oculito, which is currently in the Castro Valley Marketplace.

Don Feria/Special to The Chronicle

For Ochoa, it's just one more of the growing pains of opening his first restaurant. The openness of the space makes it challenging to create an intimate restaurant setting. There's no privacy from the rest of the food hall, something that becomes particularly evident when a local band practices on the opposite side of the mezzanine.

So what does that mean for Oculito? Ochoa sees its location as temporary, hoping to find another space he can make his own. For now, he's taking these challenges as a way to grow.

In spite of the oddity of the restaurant, I can't say for certain that the restaurant doesn't channel the supernatural. The food certainly tastes like it. Ochoa claims that his history in hard-core bands only factors into his work ethic and aesthetic; but looking at the plate of chicken, don't be surprised if you start to hear brutal guitar licks in your head. Stranger things have happened.

This story was updated to reflect the accurate spelling of Mikey Ochoa's name.