

A Taste of Mexico City

XOCO FOOD CART
BRINGS SWEET HORCHATA
AND SPICY PAMBAZOS
TO EUGENE By Daemion Lee

Ever since Xoco Mexican Street Food set up shop on 13th Avenue last October, the food cart has focused on introducing Eugene to its unique Mexican cuisine.

"You can taste it; it's from Mexico City," Gregorio Gonzalez, cook and co-owner of Xoco, says with a smile. Inside the small, brightly colored cart, Gonzalez cuts open a bolillo roll and begins making a torta, Mexico City's take on a sandwich, consisting of a roll filled with meat, cheese and veggies.

He says he grew up in Mexico's capital and learned to cook because his family used to run a restaurant and food cart. "I was the one after school going to work," he says. "My way to cook is basically my mom and grandmother and grandfather's way of cooking."

Within minutes, the torta is ready to go and Gonzalez hands it out through the window, wrapped in a white paper bag. The torta is a hearty meal in itself, spicy and savory, perfect to grab on the run in the afternoon or evening.

Besides tortas, Xoco also specializes in pambazos, which are similar to tortas but soaked in a spicy red sauce, and homemade drinks such as horchata, a sweet rice milk. Xoco's tostadas are particularly tasty, a potent combination of chicken, bacon and chipotle. They also make their own salsa and, this winter, champurrado (Mexican hot chocolate) is on the menu.

It's a family-run food cart, so relatives are usually nearby. Gonzalez's brother helps with the cooking and Rachel Poplack, the other co-owner of Xoco and Gonzalez's partner, is never too far away, though she is often busy taking care of their two children. "We'd been talking about a food cart for a couple of years," Poplack

says. Late last year, their idea finally became a reality: a bright orange, yellow and green food cart with a hand-lettered sign that says "Xoco Mexican Street Food."

The name Xoco, Gonzalez says, is pronounced "Shokoh" and comes from the ancient Aztec word for the prickly pear cactus fruit. "It grows two fruits, one is sweet, one is not sweet," Gonzalez says about the prickly pear. The latter fruit is the one they call "xoco" and is often used in traditional Mexican cooking.

In Mexico City, food carts selling food like tortas and

pambazos are everywhere. "You find five or six, sometimes 10 food carts together," Gonzalez says. "Each one has its own flavor."

For now, though, there is only one food cart in Eugene selling Mexican-style street food. Gonzalez admits it's not exactly like the food in Mexico City. "But this is the closest," he says. ■

Xoco is located on East 13th Avenue near the Bijou, open Monday through Friday 11 am to 5 pm and Saturday 11 am to 8 pm. Check out Xoco's Facebook page for updates and special offers.



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