
THE ROAMING GOURMET

Visits Carolina's and Phoenix Ranch Market

BY KATHY COUTURIÉ

Any self-respecting food tourist should strongly consider a visit to two culinary havens in Phoenix—Carolina's Mexican Food and the Ranch Market. Located far from the trendy, upscale ambience of North Scottsdale, both places offer an authentic look at Phoenix's food heritage.

My first stop was Carolina's Mexican Food—the minute I heard “best tortillas in town” I was en route, barely able to observe local traffic ordinances as I raced to lunch. Carolina's is located southeast of downtown Phoenix, in a residential neighborhood. This is definitely a destination restaurant. I noticed that their overflowing parking lot contained all types of vehicles: police cars, service trucks, compacts, mid-size cars, minivans, BMWs and Mercedes were just some of the vehicles parked outside. Once inside, the ambience is very basic. No frills here, just lots of tables, chairs, plastic utensils, walls covered with accolades and awards, and many happy customers.

I must have spent 10 minutes reading through the menu options, posted on large boards above the kitchen/service area. You order at one window, pick up at another, and frankly I was downright distraught that I'd come alone. The offerings were so numerous that I wished I'd brought at least 3-12 people so I could taste everything listed. I ordered a combination plate with a cheese enchilada, taco, rice, and beans for a whopping \$4.25, and sat wondering why, oh why, didn't I just give in to temptation and add a tamale, some flautas, a chicken chimichanga, and a foot-long deep-fried chorizo burro? It's not like anyone there knew me, and had I ordered it all, the tab wouldn't have exceeded \$30.

I did enjoy a side order of the famous handmade flour tortillas, dipping them in the 1/2 pint of enchilada sauce I'd ordered, thinking I'd take it back to my Phoenix pal's home. But no—I devoured it all right then and there. Call-in orders are welcome, and on Saturday nights you can bring your own pot for *menudo*.

Carolina's Mexican Food is located at 1202 E. Mohave Street in Phoenix; (602) 252-1503 or visit www.carolinasmex.com.

The Phoenix Ranch Market is minutes away from Carolina's. It would be difficult to find a grocery store more entertaining than this. To enhance your shopping/dining pleasure, there is lively Mexican music playing throughout the store, plus an exceptionally friendly staff—all of whom speak English.

Displays are spectacular, the aisles are wide, and the selection is incomprehensibly vast.

There's a panaderia with fresh baked goods, an *aguas frescas* stand with fresh fruit drinks, a *tortilleria*, and a large *cocina*/food court area where you can eat in or take out Mexican delicacies such as *tortas*, Mexican specialty plates, grilled fresh fish, fried chicken. You name it, they're cooking it.

The seafood department stocks too many types of fish to count, and offers a *ceviche* bar, *tacos de camaron*, both baby and large-sized octopus, and 10 different types of shrimp. You know you're not in Kansas any longer when you enter the lengthy *carniceria* aisle and find yourself eye-to-eye with whole beef heads, and your choice of beef feet with the skin on or off.

There is an entire aisle containing every type of canned and/or bottled Mexican product you can think of, including white hominy, *nopales*, *tomatillos*, *salsas*, *sauces* and *chiles*. In the bulk section there are special herbs, numerous *chiles*, beans, and rice. The produce section is a virtual work of art; the heaping displays of fruit and vegetables are enough to make you stop and just gawk at the abundance.

Do not miss a visit to the Phoenix Ranch Market!

Phoenix Ranch Market, 1602 E. Roosevelt in Phoenix and other Valley locations; (602) 254-6676.

