



Surf Tacos

From Baja to experimental mushroom to Cajun oyster, we've got the seafood tacos of your dreams.

by MATTHEW KORFHAGE
photography by KEITH LANPHER

The fish taco does not travel like other food. It travels with the waves, and with rumors of chilliness.

Fourteen years ago, when Pelon's Baja Grill first opened in a strip mall, tucked away behind the hotels of the Oceanfront, co-owner Robyn Muscara worried Virginia Beach wouldn't understand her family's approach to tacos.

The Baja taco is a fillet of mild white fish fried and breaded and wrapped in corn tortillas, ensconced in cabbage cut to the barest slivers – livened by a swirl of acid and fat from creamy white sauce, bright pico de gallo and a hint of lime. The Baja

taco is crispness, tenderness and lightness.

The Muscaras moved here from Southern California, where Baja tacos are a gospel learned from the seafood-rich surf towns of Mexico's western peninsula. But in 2005, Pelon's was one of only two spots – along with Gringo's, which opened within months of Pelon's – serving it.

"When we first brought them this way, people didn't understand them because we were using corn tortillas," Muscara remembers. "People were used to grilled fish. They were used to tacos with lettuce and cheese."

Of course, local surfers were hip to them, having chased waves in San Diego and Mexico; so it makes sense that weeks after Pelon's opened, Virginia Beach surf impresario Paul West found her and booked the restaurant for the East Coast Surfing Championships.

But Baja is not the only surf taco. These days Tidewater embraces seafood tacos with greater fervor than almost anywhere but California, albeit in a homespun variety guaranteed to confuse anyone visiting from Mexico. Seemingly every seafood palace and beachfront bar on the Chesapeake Bay or Oceanfront has its own take on this taco, whether mahi mahi, firecracker shrimp or oyster, not to mention an improbably delicious creation made with tuna and mushroom.

We spent a month trying more than 40 fish tacos from all over Tidewater to pick our favorites among the bounty. Here are the seven spots to try.



Baja fish or shrimp tacos at Pelon's Baja Grill

One of the most important ingredients to making tacos at Pelon's, says co-owner Robyn Muscara, is a very fancy knife.

"You have to cut the cabbage really thin like hair," she says. "It took us forever to find the right knife."

Make the cabbage too thick, and the texture and bitter crunch take over the taco. And the magic of the Baja-style taco, which Pelon's makes as faithfully as anyone in this region, is a very specific balance.

First it's the flavor of the grilled corn tortilla, finished and caramelized on the flat-top. Then it is the softness of the fish and the light decadence of beer-batter breading. And then it's the delicate cabbage, whose thin strands

should crunch and then dissolve. That cabbage is a sauce delivery mechanism, picking up the flavors of Pelon's chipotle-drenched crema.

Still, it's possible the shrimp taco at Pelon's is better than the classic breaded fish. The shrimp's saltiness is set off by diced-pineapple salsa mixed with red bell peppers, jalapenos and onion; this bit of tropical brightness is a perfect complement to the \$5 margaritas at happy hour. And one way or another, every hour at Pelon's is a happy hour.

— 3619 Pacific Ave., Virginia Beach; 738 W. 22nd St., Norfolk

The Truth

at Bro's Fish Tacos

For five years, Jacob Harver served his Baja-inspired fish tacos out of a roving food truck, the movements of which could be tracked only on Facebook. More than 7,000 people followed him on social media to track his whereabouts, all of them searchers for the Truth.

The Truth is Bro's Fish Tacos' finest achievement, a fillet of wild-caught, beer-battered flounder loaded so densely into a tortilla that the taco seems pregnant. When combined with sliced cabbage, grape-tomato pico de gallo (nearly psychedelic in its redness) and any of four mayo-yogurt sauces, it is near-tawdry in its excess. But the beer batter remains admirably light, a school in crispness without the oily weight that afflicts far too many breaded fish tacos.

No one would confuse it as a product of Mexico. Instead, it is almost Greek in its Mediterranean vividness and dogged insistence that you eat your fill.

At the brick-and-mortar location of Bro's, which opened in November, those tacos are finally available with a pint of beer and a seat at the bar. The menu has also expanded into nachos and churros, as well as catch-of-the-day specials alongside the other fish taco options.

But every single day, the Truth is unchanging. The Truth is honest. And the Truth is good.

— 277 N. Lynnhaven Road, Virginia Beach

Fried oyster tacos

at Casa Pearl

To get what's behind the oyster taco at Williamsburg's Casa Pearl, you've got to go deep. The restaurant is a nest of contradictions — a casual, fun seafood spot with a serious pedigree. Chef Mikey Maksimowicz, formerly of Washington's Michelin-starred Fiola, chucked that career for a life as a humble Southern seafood salesman, and both those backgrounds come into play at Casa Pearl.

The food here is both hyperlocal and internationally inspired, drawn in part from the taco-filled Nicaraguan childhood of Maksimowicz's wife and partner, Chelsea.

All of this comes together in Casa Pearl's oyster taco. The Chesapeake Bay oysters are brined Southern-style in buttermilk and Fresno hot sauce before being dredged and fried in coriander and the same corn masa used to make the tortillas. The slaw puts the taco in Baja territory, but the sauce is Cajun remoulade, a megaphone for seafood flavor touched up with heat from jalapeno in the slaw.

The taco is boisterously juicy, bright, and satisfyingly chewy, made serious by just a touch of pain.

— 722 Merrimac Trail, Williamsburg



The fried oyster taco from Casa Pearl

Firecracker shrimp tacos

at Fin Seafood

Every year from May to August in Newport News, Kenny Sloane's fine-dining seafood spot turns into ground zero for live outdoor music in the Port Warwick square. The lawn in front of Fin Seafood fills with revelers in love with the blues, desperate for food they can hold in their hands. And so Sloane improvised.

"I've always had fish tacos," he says. "But we started experimenting: The firecracker shrimp has always been one of the most popular items on the menu. People enjoy it so much, so we put it in taco form to give it extra variety."

Starting with the classic mayo-sriracha bar mix, Sloane turns up the volume with sambal chile paste from Indonesia, then rounds out its depth with sesame, soy and fresh herbs. He then lays the shrimp down on a bed of lightly sweet and acidic slaw.

But the key to the taco is that same salsa verde that goes on Sloane's rotating fish tacos, which he makes using the tasty, fatty belly meat of the fresh fish he serves on the restaurant's high-dollar entrees.

The salsa is simple: the tart crispness of tomatillos, the citrusy wallop of lime, and the bittersweet depth of grilled onions. But playing against the lower and earthier spice and salt of the shrimp, it is a high and tremulous grace note you can hear better than whoever happens to be playing in the square.

— 3150 William Styron Square, Newport News

The firecracker shrimp taco from Fin Seafood



Fish tacos

at Jessy's Taco Bistro

The Taco Bistro in Ghent is the most overlooked piece of the Jessy's taco empire. It is a dressed-up restaurant somehow so separate from owner Jorge Romero's other homestyle taquerias in Ocean View and Virginia Beach that it can feel like a separate being altogether. The often understaffed restaurant also moves at its own rhythms, slower than most lunch breaks can accommodate. But do not sleep on these fish tacos.

The Bistro makes its own trio of tacos with whatever fish happens to be fresh – the same fish it'll use in the ceviche on any given day, which often turns out to be a variety of rockfish. Freshness is pivotal. Unlike many blackened fish tacos in these parts, which are too often grilled to chewy, chickeny oblivion, the unbreaded, spice-crust-ed fish fillets served at Jessy's are light, tender, moist and full of their fish's subtle, salted flavor.

Within a corn tortilla lightly crisped on the grill, the flavors in the Jessy's taco are like a cross between west-coast Baja flavors and Mexico's Yucatan south: pickled onion and lime-oregano slaw, radish topper, and a lightly spicy chili-lime aioli. It is a supreme balance of acid and fat, savory depth and a whisper of heat. Get lucky on the time of year, and the tacos will come with a seasonal side of charred poblano and corn of equal earthy depths.

Dear Lord, it is a good taco plate – the sort of meal that has you texting your dining partner hours later just to confirm the profundity of your experience.

— 328 W. 20th St., Norfolk



Tuesday fish tacos

at Auntie's Tiki

At a lot of bars, Taco Tuesday is a low-cost, low-effort sport. But at Filipino cocktail hall Auntie's Tiki, it's improvisational art. New head chef Abriel Levantino reserves each Tuesday for an experimental-taco break, different each week.

Alongside \$5 margaritas made with the sweet-and-sour kick of Filipino calamansi citrus, Levantino kicks out a rotating menu of tacos that always includes at least one fish option.

But when it comes to what he serves, you're at the

mercy of the seas. One Tuesday, you may arrive to find seared tuna on a house-made blue-masa corn tortilla, drenched in tangy Meyer lemon crema and a dusting of sinus-tingling wasabi pea crumbs. The next Tuesday, it may be a delicately diaphanous cod topped with pink pickled onions and a bright garden of fresh cilantro, the tortilla toasted and pillowy in its comforts.

— 4312 Holland Road, Virginia Beach



Tuna mushroom tacos at Gringo's Taqueria

Gringo's Taqueria is an Oceanfront religion, having been voted the best in Virginia Beach over and over, until voting becomes boring.

Evie Fetterolf and Tony Pellino's flour-tortilla tacos aren't really Baja-style, nor would you expect to find anything like their orange chicken or Pabst beer-battered fish tacos anywhere in Mexico. Gringo's is pure Virginia Beach.

And the fish taco that's tastiest there is by far the most unlikely: a grilled tuna taco folded into a flour

tortilla with romaine lettuce, zipped up with habanero crema and pico de gallo, and girded by the umami depth of grilled and garlic-spiced button mushrooms.

This taco should, by all accounts, not exist. It has no particular precedent in any cuisine. And yet it is delicious, a balance of alien elements. And because there is nothing else quite like it, it is also what you'll crave at Gringo's after you eat it. ■

— 612 Norfolk Ave., Virginia Beach



Field trip! At North American Sake with owners Centofante and Goldstein, left: Matthew Korfhage, and Shelby and George Culver. Above, a traditional *nigori*.

by MATTHEW KORFHAGE
 photography by ADAM EWING

In IX Art Park, a self-consciously hip enclave in Charlottesville with a weekend farmer's market and more wall art than a New York subway, young couples stream into a sunny, knotted-wood taproom to taste Virginia barbecue and sample flights of inventive craft brews.

An hour after the brewery doors opened, you'd struggle to find a seat. Tables filled up with spicy poke bowls, kimchi-topped pastrami sandwiches and six-deep sampler flights of hazy or fruity house brews.

If this scene took place at popular Three Notch'd Brewing Co. next door, it'd be about as surprising as pecan pie. But this place isn't making beer. Instead, the packed 6-month-old taproom at the North American Sake Brewery is serving a distinctively Virginian take on something made in only a handful of places in America and nowhere else in this state: Japanese-style sake, a thousand-year-old tradition of rice "wine" that's brewed a little bit like beer.

North American Sake, which opened in October, is the latest example of the Japanese culinary boom in America. But while sake is growing, it's still unfamiliar to most American diners and drinkers.

Sake can be every bit as refined and as varied as European wine or as funky as Belgian beer, deeply savory with wild notes of banana or flowers or so clean and crisp that it might as well be a winter breeze. But most sake drinkers here have been exposed only to the cheap bottles at discount sushi spots, where it's often served hot to mask flavors — the equivalent of learning about American whiskey by drinking Old Crow.

We boarded the sake party bus to Charlottesville with food lover and photographer George Culver, and drank fine and fruity sake while the founders of North American Sake, Jeremy Goldstein and Andrew Centofante, laid down the ABCs of Virginia sake.



FOR THE S K E OF VIRGINIA

Virginia's first craft sake brewery is a mix of ancient tradition and good old-fashioned fun.

The story of Virginia sake began in a basement – OK, fine, it started in Los Angeles. That’s where Goldstein, then a filmmaker in Richmond, got his first experience with amazing sake. Four years ago he went to a special tasting held by a sommelier, and was floored by what he found.

“I grew up in California, where sushi and sake is everywhere. But I hadn’t had good sake. It was just a thing you drank with friends – hot, or in a sake bomb,” Goldstein says. “But I tasted for the first time cold, fresh, craft sake. I questioned why I’d never had it before.”

When he got back to Virginia, he brought a few choice bottles for Centofante, a home brewer. “Andrew and I had a great night, drank some really good sake, and he says, ‘I’d like to learn how to brew it.’”

Centofante set up a makeshift brewing lab in his basement. The first 5-gallon batch of homemade sake became two, then three, then 50. The men started sourcing their rice not from the supermarket but from specialty suppliers, and tapped into a loose network of Americans trying to re-create the Japanese tradition in America.

The partnership at first was simple. Centofante made the sake and Goldstein drank it. But soon Centofante was making so much that the pair started holding parties to have friends try it. This culminated in a massive tasting, with 50 bottles and almost as many friends.

“It was all gone in hours,” Centofante says. “They went through the party hunting down wounded soldiers, shaking the bottles to see if they still had sake in them.” Their friends also gave them a standing ovation. At that point, the pair realized they were probably on to something.

So, sake isn’t wine. But it isn’t quite beer either.

All fermentation involves yeast. That’s what turns the sugar in wine grapes or malted barley into delicious, delicious alcohol. But sake involves an extra step, and an extra-special fungus called koji – named the “national fungus” of Japan by its brewers association – that breaks down the starches in rice and turns them into sugar. Koji is also the stuff behind the deep, savory flavors in soy sauce and miso soup.

Before he makes each batch of sake, Centofante spends two days carefully spreading out and gathering a bed of steamed rice in his *koji muro*, a carefully controlled room in each sake brewery devoted to growing koji. When he balls the rice together, it gets warmer. And when he spreads it out, it releases the heat.

“When you do koji, it’s kind of a Zen thing,” he says. “You spread it out in rows like a meditation garden. But there’s also a purpose for those patterns: It makes for more surface area open to the air.”

Each batch of sake takes 30 days, and involves multiple



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– Andrew Centofante

layers of steamed rice and koji. In the fermentation tanks visible from North American Sake Brewery’s taproom, the koji makes sugar but also creates boomerily savory flavors like the ones in miso. And then the yeast turns the sugar into alcohol, along with adding fruity notes like banana or melon.

“It all happens in parallel,” Centofante says. “It’s a beautiful process.”

Rice is religion in Japan – and with sake, it’s no different. The loftiest sake creations, called *junmai daiginjo*, involve milling down each rice grain for days until only the pure starch core remains: just 50 percent of each grain. The higher the polish on the rice, the more pure and fruity the flavors.

As for the really cheap sake served hot at your local shopping-mall sushi spot? Well, they might not mill it down much at all, and that can mean a lot more impurities and funny flavors: hot and boozy alcohol notes, or a rough and bitter bite.

“Higher-polish sakes are works of art, they’re amaz-

ing, but they’re expensive, and a lot of people may be intimidated by that,” Centofante says. “It’s kind of like the beer world: You’ve got your Bud Light, and these really high-end craft beers.”

But anything milled down to below 70 percent of the grain – like all of North American Sake’s current brews – is considered premium sake. And because North American’s sake rice comes from growers in Arkansas and California, it also has a distinctly American flavor.

Centofante can talk *genshu* (undiluted sake) and *nama* (unpasteurized sake) with the best of them. But you won’t find a lot of the technical sake jargon at North American. The brewpub mixes old-school Japanese craft with American-style experimentalism and approachability – in a taproom whose food menu is an equal mix of American and Asian flavors. Brunch includes deeply comforting Szechuan-spiced biscuits, while lunch might involve salmon and short rib barbecue made by an old-school pit master, deepened with the same koji used to make the sake.

The food at the brewpub mixes flavors – say, a barbecue whose flavor is enriched by koji. In the *koji muro* room, above, Centofante works rice in a zenlike practice of aerating it.



Among the sakes on offer at North American, you'll find an equal mix of traditional and American wild-style. Their Big Baby sake – so called because it's the youngest sake of the bunch, but still really alcoholic – is a traditional unfiltered *nigori* sake. So it's sweet and hazily snow-white with rice and yeast. It's like the juicy New England-style IPA of sakes, with the same friendly softness and satisfying mouthfeel.

Their other flagship sake, Real Magic, is the same batch of sake after it's been given a little time to settle, and the difference is startling: The big and fruity banana and melon flavors come out to play. Another traditional-style sake, Quiet Giant, is fermented an extra five days so the sake becomes both more dry and more alcoholic: a whopping 18.5 percent alcohol by volume.

But Centofante is also experimenting with adding fruit flavors. Though Japanese brewers often add plum to their sake, the flavors at North American aren't any you'll find in Japan. One is a spicy jalapeno-mango, while another tastes like fruit punch. The best so far, called

Sweet Agony, mixes lemon puree and an infusion of fresh mint leaves.

"We've had a lot of native Japanese come visit," Goldstein says. "It really bends their minds. I think it opens their perspective, not that they would ever do it. When they taste our traditional sakes – the flagships, the *nigoris* and *junmais* – they see the respect, and the craftsmanship. So when they move into the flavors, they know that it's coming from a good place."

As for Centofante, he feels like he's just scratching the surface of what he wants to do with sake: He's considering using beer yeasts, wine yeasts and different kinds of koji, and is trading ideas with a small network of American sake brewers from Boston to Texas to California. But he says he has at least one heartening sign that he's on the right track.

"A guy came in who was training to be a sake sommelier – the son of native Japanese. And they left with a case. You can tell me it's great. But if you buy a case, that tells you something." **D**

Centofante and Goldstein develop offshoots like a spicy jalapeno-mango sake. Yet they say they experiment with a rigor that respects tradition, their work received well by Japanese.



Left: It all starts with fresh - white asparagus, ramps, salsify, maitake mushroom, pigeon.

Right: Longoven's other passion: flavors from fermentation. The roast pigeon is succulent, the salsify caramelized.



LONG TIME COMING

Richmond's Longoven spends months crafting flavors you've never known.

by MATTHEW KORFHAGE | photography by TODD WRIGHT

Almost every plate at Longoven begins six months before you eat it. It starts, often enough, in a jar. Andrew Manning, one of three chef-owners at the year-old Richmond fine-dining restaurant, keeps a fermentation lab that looks like the lair of a mad scientist.

"This clear liquid right here is shiitake mushrooms," he says, pointing to a vacuum-sealed bag full of a pasty substance that will soon add depth to salt-cured mackerel. "That stuff is gold. This stuff tastes insane."

Stacks and rows of containers are filled with experiments in flavor, each of which might ferment for months to attain just the right depth and funk. Manning, who sports a neck tattoo and neatly barbered hair, is giddy about his work.

He pulls out more and more house creations, each the basis for a world of dishes: blackened Meyer lemons that look like squishy coal, house-made black garlic, precious spring ramps being turned into vinegar, and three different cures and fermentations of turnips used for a smoked duck dish.

Using tweezers, he plucks a salt-cured green strawberry with the cakey give of meringue. "Salty, umami, strawberry bombs," Manning calls them. His co-chef, Patrick Phelan, opts instead for "Straw-boshi," a play on the name for preserved Japanese plums. They taste like nothing except themselves, so dense with the essence of tart berry they have become utterly alien.

Maybe he'll powder them, and dust them onto a



Left: Chefs and owners Andrew Manning, Patrick Phelan and Megan Fitzroy Phelan.

Top right, cured rockfish in buttermilk with wild onion flowers.

Right, white asparagus beurre blanc with salmon roe.

halibut crudo, Manning says. “Or ice cream!” says pastry chef Megan Fitzroy Phelan, Patrick’s wife.

“Or ice cream,” he agrees. The restaurant, much like the food it serves, has been a long time in the making.

Bon Appetit may have named Longoven one of the top 50 new restaurants in America in 2016, but it took another year and a half before it actually opened in Scott’s Addition.

Back in 2016, the chefs were cooking their refined tasting menus only twice a month, out of a tiny wood-fired bakery called Sub Rosa that didn’t even have a conventional oven.

“At the pop-up, it was hilarious,” says Patrick Phelan. “We had a Weber grill outside the back door, and even if it was raining we had to run out there.”

The idea for the restaurant originated with a decade-old pact among the three. Patrick Phelan and Manning had first met at Richmond fine-dining institution L’Opossum.

“Andrew was the first chef that took me under his wing and taught me a different perspective of how to approach food, an ethos with food,” says Phelan, now 45. “I was young, still in my 20s, but I took it pretty seriously.”

Years later, Manning called the Phelans from Italy to propose a reunion in Virginia. At the time Manning was cooking in Italy’s Piemonte region, while Megan was making desserts at some of the finest restaurants in New York. Patrick, meanwhile, had taken a break from restaurants. But they all agreed to return. When they started Longoven in 2014, they found a Richmond dining scene in full bloom. They ran pop-up dinners off and on for four years while searching for the perfect location and moment.



Longoven finally opened last June in a warmly minimalist space painted the colors of deep ocean. The restaurant feels as meditative as a Rothko painting, aside from the chefs’ habit of playing tunes by Arcade Fire or Willie Nelson in the restaurant.

The menu is equally minimal, and ever changing: just 15 or so small plates, ordered a la carte, or an immersive chef’s tasting menu that has to be scheduled in advance.

Each dish is listed, in the current fine-dining fashion, only by its ingredients: “mussels, melted leek, bacon, potato foam.” No plate ever repeats precisely, but instead changes with what’s in season and the ingredients that have matured in the back of the house.

Manning starts each day in the garden, farming the herbs and flowers that adorn his plates. “It’s a nice way to start the day before working in the kitchen for 16 hours,” he says. And over the past year, the three have slowly built their arsenal of fermented flavors, an armamentarium they had no access to when working the pop-ups.

Three years ago, Longoven first served a pigeon plate with New Zealand spinach that grew “like grapevines” in Manning’s garden, and fresh coriander he had in abundance. But on a tasting menu in April, the dish became something closer to conceptual art.



The pigeon's claw hangs over one side of the plate, next to a woody carpet of maitake mushroom, acidic sorrel herb and twiglike salsify, a root that tastes a bit like oysters. The dish looks a bit like a freshly killed bird on the forest floor, a hunter's still life. And yet the meat is so tender and the flavors so bottomless the comfort is immediate. It is a rarefied and luxuriant vision of farm food.

The drinks and pastries extend from a similar aesthetic. Much of the Europe-heavy wine list is naturally fermented, and the restaurant's predilection for kombuchas and preserved fruits also finds its way into the cocktail menu. Meanwhile, desserts build on the flavors in the savory dishes: On the tasting menu, an airy sunchoke foam with shrimp might be followed a few courses later by a sunchoke and coffee dessert.

The comprehensiveness of vision has paid off. The restaurant has been named the best new restaurant in Richmond by nearly every major publication in the city that hands out such awards.

But according to Patrick Phelan, Longoven was never planned as the elaborate fine-dining powerhouse it's become. Its owners originally thought they might just open a punky, improvised spot where they'd serve food directly to diners sitting just feet away. But they built their restaurant the same way they build each plate. They allowed it to take shape naturally, from the ingredients they had available.

"I mean, we used to always say 'Let's just open a place and do food,'" Phelan says. "Now sometimes I look at this place and I just pinch myself. I mean, (Andrew) mentioned this idea to me in a phone call 12 years ago. And now we're here." ■

The recently installed fire pit adds warmth to Longoven's outdoor seating area.