



One of Tako Cheena's Latin and Asian fusion "takos." PHOTO PROVIDED

## 2 WINTER PARK'S HOTTEST NEW RESTAURANTS

By LAURA REILEY, Tampa Bay Times

They had me at "new grilled cheese restaurant."

A couple of times a year it's valuable to take a peek at what's going on in our neighboring Central Florida cities.

After all, many of us have reason on occasion to head east to Orlando (cue *It's a Small World*), so I like to keep abreast of the restaurant scene there.

It didn't take much sleuthing to determine that Winter Park, that lovely historic burg northeast of downtown Orlando, is pilling over with exciting new finds. The Alford Inn recently opened **Hamilton's Kitchen**, an open-kitchen affair with rustic farmers' tables and a menu that is a

paean to the history of Florida agriculture. **Toasted**, the grilled cheesery, prompted me to gas up, make sure my GPS was working and hit the road.

A girl can get mighty hungry on a 90-minute drive, so I ditched I-4 a little early such that I could swing by **Tako Cheena** (932 N Mills Ave., Orlando; 321-236-7457; takocheena.com), an Asian taco hole-in-the-wall that has been making waves this past year. Co-owner Pom Moongauklang first shook things up with Pom Pom's Teahouse & Sandwicheria and now she's done it again with a super-inexpensive hipster taco spot that pushes the envelope at every turn.

The turns I took included a flour-tortilla

taco (I refuse to call them takos, okay?) cradling crispy tofu, shredded cabbage and a gorgeous Indian yellow curry sauce, and another one of Thai peanut chicken crunchy with cilantro, scallion and cabbage, perfectly married with a side sauce of tomatillo doctored with kaffir lime.

While I didn't moon after the Korean- and Japanese-inspired dogs, I was momentarily sad that the previous evening's late-night crowd (open until 4 a.m. weekends) had snarfed all the East-West empanadas.

Shooting up Mills Avenue to Winter Park just \$10 poorer, I considered my first stop more appetizer than Lunch No. 1. Onward to Jeff Yarmuth and daughter Megan's ingenious **Toasted** (1945 Aloma Ave., Winter Park; 407-960-3922; igettoasted.com). Jeff was the former president and COO of Sonny's Real Pit Bar-B-Q; his daughter spent time in the fashion business in New York. It was there that she fell in love with that city's myriad one-trick-pony restaurants, places that do one or two things and do them well.

And who doesn't like a good grilled cheese? With one wall devoted to a cheese "periodic table" and another one a yellow lunar landscape that takes you a second to realize is Swiss cheese, the tiny fast-casual spot embraces its theme (there are even sconces made of metal cheese graters, light filtering through in lovely patterns).

Order at the counter, definitely the fig and goat with Havarti, basil and honey, and probably the "blackberry melt" with fontina, applewood-smoked bacon, blackberry mash and arugula if you're sensible. These aren't huge sandwiches, but the crusts are golden and buttery, the ingredients impeccable.

They also offer burgers, salads and tremendous fries with truffle oil and rosemary, but for me, make it grilled cheese, please. All are \$5 to \$7.

I contemplated a third lunch (predinner?) at the new **B&B Junction** (2103 W Fairbanks Ave., Winter Park; 407-513-4134; bbjunction.com) opened not long ago at the former 4 Rivers Smokehouse location, but felt I couldn't do their 100 percent

local grass-fed beef burgers justice. Next time. Instead I wandered Winter Park Village (which has its own very respectable lineup of restaurants, from Ruth's Chris to P.F. Chang's and Menchie's Frozen Yogurt with its cult following).

Julie and James Petrakis were nominated for a James Beard award on the strength of their flagship Winter Park restaurant, **Ravenous Pig**.

But at the end of last year they started getting serious attention for their sophomore effort, **Cask and Larder** (565 W Fairbanks Ave., Winter Park; 321-280-4200; caskandlarder.com). Tying into a national trend of Southern public houses (think of them as hip emporia of haute-Southern fare aided and abetted by classic Prohibition-era cocktails, heavy on the bourbon). Now add in Ron Raike's (former brewmaster at Shipyard Brewing Company) 10 or so house-brewed beers and a dining room that will knock your socks off, and it's easy to see why the valet parkers were so sweaty.

This place bristles with foodie fervor. I eased into things with a Sazerac (High West double rye, local honey, Ridge absinthe, a couple of types of bitters) and a trio of Kentucky hams (Broadbent, Newsome, Father's), served on a board with biscuits, jellies and mustard.

Enjoying how the finger food was working for me (eh, it could have been the Sazerac), I continued with a "Southern picnic" of grilled sausage, farmstead cheese, deviled eggs, ham butter and such, all elevated with an array of pickled tidbits from eggplant to cauliflower with golden raisins. This is Southern food in the vein of *Yardbird in Miami* or *Husk in Charleston, S.C.*, edgy and exciting, with showstoppers like duck ham and country-fried rabbit.

After capping things off with an order of wit beer doughnuts paired with a soft caramel pudding, I eased myself slowly into the driver's seat for the 90-minute drive west, cataloging the day's ambitious and globe-trotting dishes. Perhaps it's not such a small world after all.