

THINGS TO DO > RESTAURANTS, FOOD AND DRINK

San Jose Improv trades laughs (for now) for a spicy, chef-driven takeout menu

Comedy club turns its kitchen over to two culinary pop-ups for takeout, delivery meals



With live comedy on hiatus, the San Jose Improv marquee now promotes its new in-house takeout restaurant. (Randy Vazquez/ Bay Area News Group)

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With live-entertainment venues still shut down, the Improv comedy clubs are turning their attention from hot topics to hot dishes.

Two culinary concepts — [Poultrygram](#) and [Resident Taco](#) — have now found a home in the kitchen of the San Jose Improv, located in the historic Jose Theatre on South Second Street.

Fans of live comedy who want to help keep the Improv afloat during this economic downturn can order meals like a Nashville Hot Chicken Sandwich or a Barbacoa Beef Torta from the new chef-driven menu for curbside pickup or delivery.

The idea was the brainchild of parent company Levity Live and the Improv's Southern California team, which decided to put the talents of newly hired executive chef Geno Fontanoza (formerly of Katsuya in Los Angeles and the Wynn Las Vegas) to good use after COVID-19 forced the closure of the clubs back in March.

"He was going to overhaul the menu. We wanted to create a concept where the guest came for the comedy but also came for the the food," said Katelyn Studebaker, marketing and event sales manager for the San Jose club.

So Fontanoza and Cesar Blancarte, vice president of operations, simply turned the concepts into pandemic-era takeout menus.

They launched the pop-ups first at the Brea club and then in Hollywood — and saw a great response — before branching out to San Jose.

"We have a fully functioning kitchen that's lain dormant for months," said David J. Williams, general manager of the local club. "Now we can get food out to the community."

Here, the reopening has allowed them to bring back the club's newly hired executive chef, Joel Jordan, a Morgan Hill native whose culinary résumé includes the Mountain Winery, and other members of the kitchen staff.

"We cook everything from scratch," Jordan said. "We elevated everything."

Resident Taco offers a menu of barbacoa, a dish that Blancarte, who grew up spending summers in Mazatlan, loved and replicated. "The inspiration came from his travels in Mexico eating street food from carts and stands," Studebaker said.

The braised beef is available in quesabirria-style tacos and quesadillas with consomme, tortas, sopes and — in a twist — ramen. Sides include street corn, black beans and churro doughnuts with dulce de leche dipping sauce.



The Poultrygram idea grew out of the idea for a Nashville-style chicken that Fontanoza had already put on the San Jose menu late in 2019 and proved to be a hit with customers.

For Poultrygram, Fontanoza developed a proprietary blend of 12 herbs and spices and a plan to brine and then double-coat each piece of chicken before it hits the deep fryer. On the menu are an Original Chicken Sandwich with cucumber aioli and house-made sweet pickle relish, the Nashville Hot with Red Rooster aioli and a chile glaze, along with spicy wings and buttermilk-fried tenders. Sides include cole slaw and cinnamon-cayenne snickerdoodles.

Dishes from both menus are available for curbside pickup — customers can pull up in the loading zone across the street from the Improv — or via food delivery apps DoorDash, Grubhub, Uber Eats and Postmates.

“This is a means to an end,” Williams said. “This is going to pay some bills until we can get the green light from the county to do comedy again.”

And already, he said, customers have stepped up to support the budding culinary operation with repeat food orders — all to ensure there’s laughter in 2021 and beyond. “I’ve been overwhelmed. They say, ‘You guys are going to stick around. I’m really happy.’”

Details: The pop-up restaurants are open daily from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. at 62 S. Second St., San Jose. To check out the menus and order, go to www.residenttaco.com or www.poultrygram.com.

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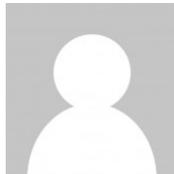
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