



THE 2024 [SAN DIEGO FOOD + WINE FESTIVAL](#) ANNOUNCES
WINNERS OF ANNUAL GRAND FIESTA “TACO TKO” COMPETITION

Chef Ilean Padilla of Mexica Fé wins People’s Choice, Chef Marcus Twilegar of Palmys Pacific Beach wins Judge’s Choice 2nd year in a row

(San Diego / November 19, 2024) - The San Diego Food + Wine Festival is thrilled to unveil the winners of this year’s highly anticipated Grand Fiesta “Taco TKO” competition. This annual event pits top chefs from Southern California and Baja in an exciting, high-energy culinary showdown, where both Festival attendees and a distinguished panel of industry experts serve as judges.

Grand Fiesta, November 10th
TACO TKO “People’s Choice” and “Judge’s Choice” Winners

This year’s Taco TKO Competition, sponsored by Edible San Diego, was held on November 10th at the Festival’s Grand Fiesta at Ingram Plaza in Liberty Station. Over 2,000 people attended this year’s Grand Fiesta where they were able to sample from over 40 different notable San Diego and Baja chefs, as well as a variety of unique beer, wine and tequila/mezcal stations while enjoying live music from Bulevar Descarga and Manny Cepeda. The beloved annual competition brings San Diego and Baja’s top taco makers together to compete head-to-head for the title of Most Awesome Taco and with that, bragging rights as one of the most celebrated taco makers on both sides of the border.

The People’s Choice first place honor went to Chef Ilean Padilla of Mexica Fé’s Desert Taco made with beef and miso mole and ashed chiles, with green salsa consisting of tomatillo, avocado, cambray onion, soy bean sprouts and lime on a homemade flour tortilla. Snagging the Judges’ Choice for the 2nd year in a row was Chef Marcus Twilegar of Palmys Pacific Beach. Chef Marcus scored high marks from the judges for his Guajillo braised short rib taco with brussels sprouts, crispy sunchoke, queso Oaxaca on a hand pressed corn tortilla.

Judges for this year’s competition included industry leaders from both sides of the border. Forty-four chefs’ dishes were carefully narrowed down to first, second, and third place winners using a graded point system. Participants were ranked based on cumulative scores considering the dish’s presentation, flavor, innovation, quality of product, and preparation in the allotted time. Judges included:

- Alan Bautista: Baja Culinary Fest

- Angelo Sosa: Tía Carmen, Kembara, Grand Hyatt Indian Wells Resort & Villas
- Carlos Gaytán: Hà, Playa del Carmen, Mexico, 1-star Michelin; Paseo, Anaheim; Tzuc, Chicago; Top Chef; Bocuse d'Or Team Mexico
- Corbin Emilio: Ukiyo & Hells Kitchen
- Drew Deckman: 1-star Michelin, Conchas de Piedra, Valle de Guadalupe, Baja + 31THIRTYONE
- Chef Federico Lopez
- Frank Vizcarra: Lola 55
- Hector Casanova: Casanovas Fish Tacos
- Javier Gonzalez: Culinary Art School
- Mawa McQueen: Mawa's Kitchen, Aspen
- Randy Smerik: Solare Ristorante
- Raul Mora: El Faro Seafood
- Scott Koenig: Founder + Writer, A Gringo in Mexico
- Suzette Gresham: 2-star Michelin Aquerello, San Francisco

The 2024 Taco TKO Competition results are as follows:

- People's Choice First Place Grand Prize Winner
 Chef Ilean Padilla – Mexica Fé
 Taco description: Beef and miso mole and ashed chiles, with green salsa made of tomatillo, avocado, cambray onion, soy bean sprouts, and lime on a homemade flour tortilla
- People's Choice Second Place Winner
 Chef Ben Diaz – Corkfire Kitchen
 Taco description: Lamb Rib Birria-Queso Taco, Salsa Roja, Huitlacoche Salad
- People's Choice Third Place Winner
 Chef Juan Saad – Alchemy
 Taco description: Taco Zarandeado with adobo marinated Mexican shrimp zarandeado, Jamaica pickled onions, chile toreado crema, and a recado negro pineapple salsa, garnished with micro cilantro
- Judges' Choice First Place Grand Prize Winner
 Chef Marcus Twilegar – Palmys Pacific Beach
 Guajillo braised short rib, brussel sprout, crispy sunchoke, queso Oaxaca, hand pressed corn tortilla
- Judges' Choice Second Place Winner
 Chef Martin Juarez – Del's Hideout
 Smoked pork belly taco with citrus marinated tomatoes and onions, avocado mash, aji crema and cilantro microgreens

- Judges' Choice Third Place Winner
Chef Lucio A Hernandez – EMMA Baja French
SHRIMP TACO (capeado or la parrilla), chintextile aioli, avocado, spicy leaves, fried shrimp and lacto-fermented mushroom powder, lime, brown butter macha sauce

“I feel very grateful to have been invited for the first time to the SDFWF, to represent Mexicali in this 20th year,” said Chef Ilean Padilla of Mexica Fé. “I hope this is the first of many invitations to San Diego Food + Wine; in the end, California is one, just as gastronomy is one. Events like San Diego Food + Wine create community, culture, commitment, add value to our product, and dignify the fields of gastronomy and hospitality. Eating always leads us to a happy moment, and what a very happy moment it was to win People’s Choice first place at the Taco TKO. Thank you to the San Diego Food + Wine Festival, as I will carry this in my heart. I extend the invitation to come to Mexicali and experience Cocina de Desierto at Mexica Fé.”

Taco TKO People’s Choice winners were awarded in cash: \$3,000 to First Place, \$1,000 to Second Place, \$500 to Third Place, and top honors in the Judges’ Choice received \$1,000 along with an ad package in Edible San Diego.

Grand Fiesta 2024 imagery can be found via Dropbox, linked [HERE](#).

ABOUT THE SAN DIEGO FOOD + WINE FESTIVAL

The 20th Annual San Diego Food + Wine Festival is an international showcase of the world’s premier wine and spirits producers, chefs and culinary personalities, and gourmet foods. Held November 2-10, 2024, the award-winning festival raises funds for culinary, oenology and hospitality scholarships and grants, and has awarded over \$600,000 to individuals and nonprofits through previous events. For more information, please visit www.sandiegowineclassic.com and [@sdfoodwine](https://twitter.com/sdfoodwine).

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