

Scenes from Elmhurst's Viva La Comida

Posted by: JoeDiStefano on Sep 23, 2012



Viva La Comida, an epic food festival complete with epic lines.

For a borough that has such an amazing breadth of cuisines there's one area where Queens is lacking: food festivals. That all changed thanks to Viva La Comida, which was put on last Friday night by the 82nd St. Partnership, which turned to Jeff Orlick to help curate the roster of street food vendors. "These are the best of the best food trucks," Orlick said. "They are undersung heroes, but they are tremendous." Trucks and carts from all over the city lined the stretch of 82nd Street from Dunningham Triangle to Roosevelt Avenue. From the Bronx came Woodlawn's Chipper Truck. Solber Pupusas was reppin the Red Hook Ball Fields. New York City's first Peruvian food cart, Morocho, and Xin Jiang Prosperity Kebabs were holding it down for Manhattan. Queens was there in force too, with Tortas Neza and the Arepa Lady generating some of the festival's longest lines.



Where else can you get Xin Jiang kebabs and tacos within 25 feet of each other?

When I arrived around 6:30 the festival was in full swing complete with a jazz band filling the streets with music from a stage set up in Dunningham Triangle. My first stop was Xin Jiang Prosperity Kebabs where I got some skewers—two lamb and a fish ball—for three bucks. Soon after I ran into Robyn Lee from Serious Eats on the gigantic line for the Arepa Lady. We were joined by James Boo and Noah Arenstein my brothers-in-arms from Real Cheap Eats.



Tacos de carnitas from Tortas Neza.

The line for Tortas Neza was much shorter—like 80%—than the one for Jackson Heights’ patron saint of Colombian street food so Noah was soon by our side plying us with *tacos de carnitas*. Nezas’ carnitas are a thing of porcine wonder. At first I thought I’d be satisfied with the few nuggets of meat I’d plucked from the top of the taco, but wound up eating half of one. One thing’s for sure I still had much more appetite left than the couple behind me who split half of a human head-sized Torta Puma.



Maria Piedad Cano, Jackson Heights’ patron saint of Colombian street food.

Did I mention that the line for the Arepa Lady was long, like more than 50 minutes long? Like get on it while it's still light out and get your arepa once the sun's gone down long? No matter, it was great fun waiting with fellow street food enthusiasts while taking in the festive atmosphere. Once we got to the front we were greeted by Maria's son who was functioning as an expediter. "Two days ago I was in Colombia eating guava right off the tree," he said.



A heaping helping of arepas de choclo.

Unlike some of my fellow street food gourmands, I live in Queens, and thus saw no need to place a gigantic order for the cheesy corny goodness that is the hallmark of the Arepa Lady. "Una de queso y una de choclo," I said to her son in my best kitchen Spanish when it came time to order. The arepa de choclo, a sweet corn pancake folded in half and filled with salty cheese and griddled with mucho mantequilla came off the flat top first. I stood there happily munching on the sweet, salty flapjack.

A few minutes later I was handed the round squat arepa de queso. I ate the cheesy gooey, salty corn cake while leaning against the Tortas Neza truck. Two thoughts crossed my mind: 1) It's been far too long since I've eaten these arepas. 2) I'm truly blessed to be living in Queens. Here's hoping for more street food festivals in Queens. I'm pulling for a Night Market in Flushing!

I caught with Orlick Sunday night after I what imagine was a 48-hour post-fest hibernation. "I couldn't have imagined a better turnout and I'm so happy that the vendors were able to sell so much," he said. "I love hearing people complain that the lines were too long; it only proves that there is demand for this type of event in this area. Hopefully I can help make it even more awesome next year." Viva La Comida indeed!!

Many thanks to James Boo, The Eaten Path for the arepas de choclo photo.