

Nacho lovers cash in on chips

OUR FAVORITES

The word "nacho," which roughly translates from Spanish as "flat-nosed," has been in use in American print for only about 20 years. That bit of information surprised me, because I thought that nachos had been around as long as cornflakes.



PAT BRUNO

The corn connection there, though, in the tortilla corn chips, which are the base of the nacho. The chips are usually topped with beans and cheese and heated until the cheese bubbles. Additional toppings include guacamole, jalapeno peppers, tomatoes, sour cream and sausage. And when the chips are done, nachos stack up as an enjoyable appetizer that is found on a lot of restaurant menus.

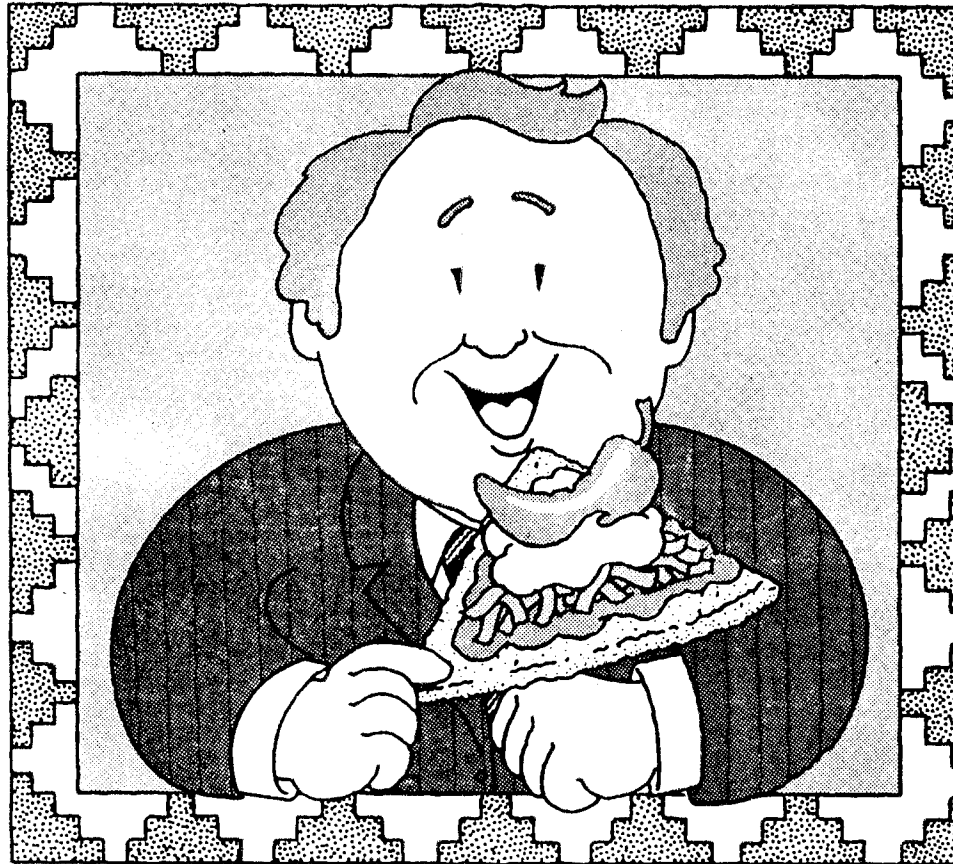
The provenance of nachos may be lost somewhere in the food bins of history, but here is a nacho family tree.

Antojitos translates from the Spanish as "little whims," a little something to snack on while drinking a margarita or tequila sunrise, and a preferred *antojitos* is the nacho.

The nacho has two first cousins—sopes and gorditas. A sope is a pinched dumpling—sorts that can be topped with beans and cheese. Gorditas puff up when they are deep-fried, and then the puff is slit and filled with any number of good things.

Nachos these days are as varied as they are tasty. Just as pizza lends itself to any number of tasty toppings, so do nachos. It seems that every place that serves nachos has its own method of constructing an interesting blend of flavors. I've never met a nacho I didn't like, so picking my favorite isn't easy. I'm sure that when I get rough trying some of your favorite places for nachos, I'll have even more to enjoy.

El Jardin on North Clark Street is a rawling Mexican restaurant. There's a lounge bar as you enter. To the right of the bar is the dining room, complete with Mexican artifacts and a huge painting on the wall of a warrior and a maiden. A lot of streamers hang from the ceiling.



SUN-TIMES/Cher Searl

Cheesy nachos these days are just as varied as as they are tasty.

When the weather is right, you can sit outdoors under umbrella tables at either of the two outdoor patios, sip on a margarita and listen to the water splashing in the fountain (or the rumbling of buses going north on Clark. After one jumbo margarita, the noises all seem to disappear, so you can relax and enjoy some first-rate Mexican food. It's all there, from carne asada to ropa vieja and everything in between: chalupas, flautas, tacos, enchiladas, queso fundido and, of course, nachos.

El Jardin does nachos two ways. You can get them straight, meaning plate edge to plate edge, with a slathering of refried beans, topped with melted cheese. A well-made guacamole, sour cream, onion and fresh tomato slices are served on the side.

Those are good, but even better are the ones with chorizo, a spicy Hispanic sausage that really zips up the flavor of the nachos and pushes them beyond the ordinary, and those nachos are anything but ordinary. They have good flavor right down to the last crispy bite.

I had an *El* of a time checking and rechecking my nacho favorites, and that brings me to **El Presidente**. You could fit **El Presidente**, which is located on North Lincoln and also has a restaurant on North Ashland, in the front courtyard of **El Jardin**. **El Presidente** is Mexican hole-in-the-wall cooking at its best. The restaurant has four booths, seven counter seats, a pinball machine and a jukebox.

The menu lists about 50 Mexican dishes,

El Jardin, 3335 N. Clark. 528-6775.
El Presidente, 2531 N. Lincoln. 528-8121.
Hillary's, 845 N. Michigan, Water Tower Place. 280-2710.

and how they manage that out of a kitchen about as big as a sombrero is beyond me. But manage they do, and very nicely, too.

I've tried a number of dishes at **El Presidente**, and this is quality Mexican cooking.

The nachos are excellent. Strips of tortilla are covered with a bean spread, a ranchero sauce with some zip and melted Chihuahua cheese dotted with flecks of brown from a short stint in the broiler. If you want to conjure the fiery godmother, lay onto the nachos some of that red salsa that comes on the side; it looked to me as if it were ready to self-ignite at any moment.

How did a place with a name like **Hillary's** become one of my favorite places for nachos? Well, one reason is that **Hillary's** serves good food. It has terrific hamburgers, great chicken dishes and dynamite desserts. Also, **Hillary's** has those little goldfish-shaped crackers at the bar, which I can eat until they swim out of my ears.

Now to the nachos. **Hillary's** does a number called *nacho grande*. Three round, flat, crispy tortillas, each about 3 inches in diameter, get a light coating of bean spread, finely diced tomatoes and sliced mushrooms. Laid over that is a bubbly, speckled brown combination of Cheddar and brick cheeses that grips the tortillas with good taste. Added flavor comes from a side dish of sour cream; added fire comes from a side dish of sliced jalapeno peppers. The *nachos grande* at **Hillary's** are splendid.

YOUR TURN: Tell us about your favorite places for *nachos* and you could win a gift certificate for a free dinner for two at **Moonraker Restaurant**, 733 S. Dearborn, plus a copy of Pat Bruno's book, *Chicago Food Favorites*. Bruno will pick the winner and include some of the best responses in a future column. Please include the full name, address and phone number of the restaurant or it can't be considered.

Send your entry to **NACHOS**, Pat Bruno, Sun-Times Features, 401 N. Wabash, Chicago 60611. Include your name, address and work and home phone numbers.