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Wraps on a roll

By Natalie Haughton, Food Editor
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(Photo by David Crane, Staff Photographer)

Wraps have come and gone over the years - and been offered at various restaurants and fast-food spots in the Los Angeles area. Now a quick service eatery devoted specifically to them, Great Wraps, opened in Canoga Park two months ago. The menu refers to the concept as "the new American sandwich."

But they are not really new (remember the long-gone, World Wrapps with three locations in the Los Angeles area more than a decade ago?).

Fresh ingredients are nestled inside a 12-inch tortilla in a choice of spinach, flour or honey wheat flavors. The 13 variations at Great Wraps are a contemporary fast fix and they're terrific. Stuffings range from chicken to Philly cheesesteak to South Beach Tuna, chicken Caesar, roast beef & Swiss or hummus veggie and Greek Salad.

The concept is taking off, says Liana Daragchyan, franchisee with her husband Yegiya, adding that it's popular for the person-on-the-go who has 30 minutes to eat. Santa Fe chicken, Buffalo chicken and sesame chicken along with hummus veggie are the top sellers. Prior to opening the place, "I had wraps at the mall in lavosh and elsewhere in pita bread, but not in tortillas," notes Daragchyan.

Dunkin' Donuts recently introduced a 99-cent egg and cheese breakfast wrap with 200 calories. Although they call them breakfast burritos, Carl's Jr. offers bacon, eggs, hash browns, cheese and salsa in various combinations wrapped in flour tortillas.

McDonald's introduced snack wraps in 2006.

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A grilled or deep fried crispy chicken breast strip is wrapped up in a flour tortilla with shredded Cheddar-Jack cheese, shredded lettuce with a choice of ranch, honey mustard or barbecue dressing.

Great Wraps, new to California (the Canoga Park location is the first), has been around 20 years, notes Mark Kaplan, CEO of Atlanta-based Great Wraps Inc., who acquired a dozen Gyro Wrap stores (mostly in Atlanta) and the concept in 1989 with Bob Solomon. Those stores, started in the late '70s, featured pita wrapped sandwiches with Mediterranean flavors. Kaplan and Solomon went more mainstream offering hot tortilla wrapped grilled sandwiches with selections slowly evolving based on shifting market tastes - and now there are 75 Great Wraps locations in eight states.

"Tortillas offer tremendous flexibility and tortillas are what customers recognize as a classic

wrapped sandwich," says Kaplan.

Wraps in this area a decade ago were complicated and tedious, he points out, noting the upscale fillings were cooked to order like a fine dining experience (which was unrealistic) and they were expensive for what they were. So it's not surprising, the design didn't work.

Kaplan views wraps as a 21st century concept. "With

wraps, you are eating less bread and enjoying the taste and textures inside. People want the emphasis to be on

the inside of the sandwich."

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(Photo by David Crane, Staff Photographer)

These convenient meals in a package are quick and easy to whip up at home for lunches or dinners - and even breakfasts by anyone who doesn't have much time to cook. Not only are wraps fun but they offer an alternative and new spin to traditional fast food. A myriad of fresh food items - including many global variations - can be bundled up (in a burrito-shaped package) in lots of store-bought tortillas (also labeled wraps or SoftWraps), ranging from low carb and low fiber to flour, sun-dried tomato and basil, spinach, whole wheat and rosemary flavors with calories from 50 to 100 or more each.

Mei Ibach, a Santa-Rosa-based recipe consultant and cooking instructor, who has developed several wrap recipes for La Tortilla Factory (which markets SoftWraps), says her favorites are Thai peanut sauce chicken; eggs with cottage cheese and caramelized onions; and mushrooms, poblano peppers and spinach. Others include roast beef and goat cheese with coleslaw, rotisserie chicken with pesto and smoked salmon with chive cream cheese and more. "I've been making all kinds of fusion wraps for lunches and picnics for a couple years."

Be sure to use a fresh tortilla wrapper so it folds easily, she advises, adding that the bundle is best rolled up with the help of plastic wrap (such as Saran wrap) for a compact, tight roll. Although wraps can be refrigerated 2 hours (after that they get a bit soggy), they are best eaten fresh.

We explored and experienced the wraps first hand at Great Wraps and have developed a trio of copycat versions using 10- or 12-inch diameter tortillas. All were stand-out hits with tasters - and other than chopping up the veggies - they went together in a jiffy.

The Buffalo chicken, which tastes great, takes just minutes if you buy cooked, boneless, skinless chicken breast, Frank's Buffalo hot sauce and prepared blue cheese dressing. Those favoring meatless versions, might like the Greek salad rolled in a colorful spinach tortilla or a hummus veggie selection in a whole wheat tortilla.

Be sure to grill the rolls on both sides until golden. A non-stick griddle (devoid of butter or olive oil) on top of the stove works well, turning once. Then cut in half diagonally and serve.

Also warm each tortilla very slightly in a microwave oven at some point (see specific recipe) before rolling to keep it from breaking or cracking. Avoid thick tortillas - thinner ones work and taste best.

For ease in rolling up the filled tortilla, place filling across only one-third to one-half of the tortilla (closest to you). Fold up the bottom of the tortilla nearest to you over filling, then fold in sides and roll up as tightly as possible.

Next time you're in the mood for lunch or dinner in a neat bundle, opt for a variety of wraps. They're great for a leisurely weekend lunch, picnic or easy supper. Make in different sizes with different diameter tortillas, depending on how you plan to serve them.

BUFFALO CHICKEN WRAP

2 (10- to 12-inch) flour tortillas (style and flavor desired such as honey wheat, regular or sun-dried tomato and basil)

1 cup diced skinless, boneless grilled chicken breast

Buffalo chicken hot sauce, amount desired to drizzle on

1/4 to 1/3 cup light ranch OR blue cheese dressing, thinned with a little milk or cream until of spreading consistency, if necessary

6 slices provolone cheese OR 6 tablespoons shredded provolone OR Jack cheese

1 cup shredded iceberg lettuce

Lay each tortilla out on a flat surface and sprinkle one-third of each tortilla closest to you with 1/2 of chicken. Drizzle chicken with hot sauce, amount desired, then top each with 1/2 of dressing. Top each with 3 slices cheese. Heat 15 to 30 seconds on a plate in a microwave oven to barely melt cheese. Sprinkle cheese on each with 1/2 of lettuce. Fold up bottom of tortilla, closest to you over filling, then fold two sides in toward center and roll up tightly from bottom edge. Heat each side on a hot nonstick griddle stove-top until golden. Cut in half diagonally and serve immediately. Makes 2 servings.

A replica version, developed by Natalie Haughton, of the wrap at Great Wraps.

GREEK SALAD WRAP

2 (10- to 12-inch) flour tortillas (style and flavor desired such as spinach, honey wheat or regular)

1 cup shredded romaine lettuce

3 tablespoons chopped red OR green onions

6 tablespoons chopped cucumbers

1/4 cup sliced ripe olives

6 tablespoons chopped tomatoes (seeds removed)

1/4 cup crumbled feta cheese

2 to 3 tablespoons sliced banana peppers (optional)

1/4 cup sour cream mixed with 2 tablespoons vinaigrette dressing OR 6 tablespoons ranch dressing thinned with a little milk or cream, if necessary

On a plate, heat tortillas, one at a time, in microwave oven until pliable and hot, about 20 to 25 seconds. On bottom third or half of each tortilla closest to you, sprinkle with 1/2 of lettuce, onions, cucumbers, olives, tomatoes, feta cheese and banana peppers. Drizzle each with 1/2 of dressing. Fold up bottom of tortilla, closest to you over filling, then fold two sides in toward center and roll up tightly from bottom edge. Heat each side on hot nonstick griddle stove-top until golden. Cut in half diagonally and serve immediately. Makes 2 servings.

A replica version, developed by Natalie Haughton, of the wrap at Great Wraps.

HUMMUS VEGGIE WRAP

2 (10- to 12-inch) flour tortillas

1/2 cup shredded pepper Jack OR Jack cheese 6 tablespoons hummus (store-bought OR homemade)

1 cup shredded romaine lettuce

4 tablespoons roasted red peppers

3 tablespoons chopped red OR green onions

6 tablespoons diced tomatoes (seeds removed)

4 tablespoons diced cucumbers

Lay tortillas out separately on a flat surface. Just below center of each tortilla and closest to you, sprinkle with 1/2 of Jack cheese. Heat in microwave oven, each separately, 10 to 15 seconds until cheese barely melts.

Top each tortilla with 1/2 of hummus, lettuce, red pepper, onions, tomatoes and cucumbers. Fold two sides of each tortilla in toward center and roll up from bottom edge as tightly as possible. Heat each side on a hot nonstick griddle stove-top until golden. Cut in half diagonally and serve immediately. Makes 2 servings.

A replica version, developed by Natalie Haughton, of the wrap at Great Wraps.

CHICKEN CAESAR SALAD WRAP

- 3/4 to 1 cup shredded cooked rotisserie chicken, breast meat only
- 1 cup finely shredded romaine lettuce
- 2 tablespoons shredded carrots
- 2 tablespoons Caesar dressing, low fat if desired
- 1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 2 tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese
- 2 (9-inch) flour tortillas, flavor of choice

In a small bowl, combine chicken, lettuce, carrots, dressing and pepper; mix well. Lay tortillas out flat, each on a dinner plate. Just below center of each, place 1/2 of chicken mixture and top with 1/2 of Parmesan. Fold sides in over filling toward center and roll up from bottom as tightly as possible. Cut each roll in half on the diagonal. Serve immediately. Makes 2 servings.

Recipe shared by Mei Ibach, developed for La Tortilla Factory.

BREAKFAST-STYLE WRAP

- 1 teaspoon olive OR canola oil
- 2 tablespoons chopped onion
- 2 medium eggs, lightly beaten with a fork
- 1 large tomato, medium diced
- 1/4 cup low-fat cottage cheese
- 2 (9-inch) flour tortillas, warmed in a skillet over low heat 1 to 2 minutes

Heat oil in a large skillet. Add onion and cook over medium heat 1 minute or until soft. In a mixing bowl, with a fork or wire whisk, whisk together egg, diced tomatoes and cottage cheese. Add egg mixture to onion and scramble 1 minute over medium-low heat until egg is set. Fill each warm tortilla with 1/2 of cooked egg mixture. Fold the sides over filling, and roll into a wrap. Cut in half and serve while hot. Makes 2 servings.

Recipe shared by Mei Ibach, developed for La Tortilla Factory.

PICANTE CHICKEN SALAD WRAPS

- 3/4 cup picante sauce OR salsa
- 2 tablespoons lime juice
- 1/2 teaspoon chili powder
- 2 cups cooked chicken breast strips
- 3 cups shredded lettuce
- 3/4 cup sour cream
- 6 (10-inch) flour tortillas, warmed
- 1 medium tomato, chopped (about 1 cup)
- 3/4 cup shredded Cheddar cheese

Mix together picante sauce, lime juice and chili powder in a large bowl. Add chicken and lettuce and toss to coat. Spread 2 tablespoons sour cream on each tortilla to within 1/2-inch of edge. Spoon about 3/4 cup chicken mixture down center of each tortilla. Top with tomato and cheese, dividing evenly among tortillas. Fold in sides of tortillas over filling and then roll up to enclose. Cut each wrap in half. Serve with additional picante sauce for dipping, if desired. Makes 6 servings.

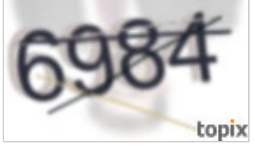
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