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ROADTRIP

Getting inside the Eastside

Just east of downtown is a wonderland of 35-foot-tall muffler men and giant burritos.

By Leslee Komaiko, Special to The Times

Page through a few of the bestselling Southern California guidebooks. Chances are, you'll find little about Boyle Heights or East Los Angeles, except perhaps a mention of the area's most celebrated restaurant, La Serenata de Garibaldi. It's an unfortunate omission, because there is plenty to enjoy in these vibrant neighboring communities just east of downtown: ornate altars to the Virgin of Guadalupe, 35-foot-tall muffler men, burritos that feed four people and cultural treasures such as Self-Help Graphics & Art.

Come to eat

The most familiar restaurant to nonresidents is **La Serenata de Garibaldi**, where the fish enchiladas get raves and the cars get valet parked. But there are plenty of other worthwhile culinary adventures to be had.

**El Tepeyac**, too, has earned fans well beyond its neighborhood. Given its celebrity, El Tepeyac is a surprisingly modest place with a jukebox, mirrored walls and motherly waitresses. The four Manuel Special burritos are the big draw. Sure, they cost \$13 or more, but the menu claims each one will feed up to four people. Six is more like it. Even the regular burritos here are three times normal size.

The **King Taco** at 3rd and Ford streets is considered the mother ship of this local chain, with lines at all hours. Choose caritas, al pastor, carne asada, chicken, tripe or hog maw tucked into warm tortillas and topped with chopped white onion and cilantro. They are simple, beautiful things.

Stay to shop

Part farmers market, part shopping mall, **El Mercado** is housed in a maze-like three-story building. On the lower level, dozens of independent retailers sell everything from mortar-and-pestle sets to cowboy boots. The next level is devoted mostly to specialty food shops — butchers and bakeries — as well as fast-food stands.

The top level is home to three restaurants — La Perla, El Gallo and El Tarasco — which offer the same menu. On Friday and Saturday evenings, crowds fill the terrace outside, waiting for tables. Inside, mariachi bands perform on multiple stages. Between sets, Spanish-speaking comedians and pretty girls in skimpy outfits entertain the crowd of extended families, couples on dates and groups of friends. A photographer makes the rounds carrying an oversized, ornately embroidered black sombrero. For a few bucks he'll snap a picture of you smiling beneath the brim.

Mufflers, murals

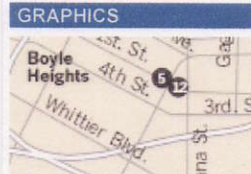
**El Pedorrero** has taken the art of the muffler shop to its extreme. While many exhaust shops in the area distinguish themselves with anthropomorphic muffler men, El Pedorrero is the most conspicuous of the bunch. For starters, there's the royal blue and electric yellow color combination that covers every surface, including a checkerboard pattern in the main work yard. A Batmobile-like vehicle, topped with a giant tire, is parked curbside.



Curb appeal  
(Annie Wells / LAT)



Recreation  
(Annie Wells / LAT)



Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles  
(LAT)  
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The real surprise, though, is the museum. Among the items on display are manual typewriters, glass grapes, ceramic roosters, a bull's head, a Bach bust, a gold cash register, peacock feathers and a statue of Talmudic scholars. Eclectic indeed.

"No touch nothing," says the rotund fellow in charge. "Nothing for sale and thank you."

With its colorful murals and mosaic-covered façade, the building that houses **Self-Help Graphics & Art** is also hard to miss. Among the artists who have studied, taught or shown at the community art center over the years are Frank Romero, Patssi Valdez, Gronk, Margaret Garcia and Diane Gamboa.

"If you're looking at places that are committed to presenting Chicano art and culture, there are but a few in the U.S.," executive director Tomas Benitez says. "We've been around for 30 years.... We have been a door and a window; we have brought culture to East L.A. as well as sending that from East L.A."

While Self-Help is best known for its printmaking workshops, its gallery, *Galeria Otra Vez*, is the longest-running art space in East Los Angeles. "Mexihcahs," a photography and artifact exhibit about Mexico's indigenous population, is on view through this weekend. The small but well-stocked gift shop is worth a stop as well. In addition to artwork, books and cards, they carry Mexican wrestling mask-inspired change purses, Che Guevara light-switch covers and skull-shaped soap.

#### Sweet tooth?

Feeling peckish? Stop into **El Gallo Bakery**. "We speak Spanish and a little bit of English too," reads the sign on the door. Inside, the cases are filled with golden pastries, cookies and miniature cakes, most priced under a buck. There are flaky pineapple turnovers, individual cherry pies, happy-face cookies covered with coarse sugar granules.

A few blocks away, tucked away on a side street, is the wildly popular **Zacatecas Raspados**. The thing to order at this modest storefront are the raspados (\$2.50 each), which are akin to snow cones but made with fresh fruit syrups like mango, strawberry and lemon.

If you want to take something home for dinner, swing by **Tamales Liliana's**. Among the choices are chili verde, chicken with vegetables, chile and cheese, corn, and sweet tamales.

#### Furnishings

Three-year-old **Buena Vista Furniture**, a charming boutique just a few doors east of La Serenata de Garibaldi, furnished the restaurant and gets a lot of referrals from its neighbor.

In addition to custom designs, Buena Vista carries imports from Mexico, India and Indonesia. You'll find intricately designed, pressed-tin light-switch plates from San Miguel de Allende and *equipales* (traditional leather chairs and tables) from Guadalajara. There are also handsome wood tables, circle-of-friends sculptures and Aztec masks.

**Eclipse de Mexico** may not be as elegant as Buena Vista, but it too carries beautiful handcrafted Mexican furniture including armoires and bookshelves. There are also whimsical devil masks, soft fabric dolls in traditional colorful Mexican dress and miniature ceramic dishes.

Finally, if thrift shopping is your thing, consider a detour to **Deseret Industries**, across from Sears. Unearthing treasures in this bilevel thrift store run by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints requires patience. Some days, you might leave empty-handed, but at least you're not competing with the Melrose-La Brea-Fairfax hawks.

Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles

#### 1. Buena Vista Furniture

1852 E. 1st St.

(323) 269-2220

#### 2. Deseret Industries

2720 E. 11th St., (323) 268-7281

#### 3. Eclipse de Mexico

4512 E. Cesar Chavez Ave.

(323) 262-4697



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