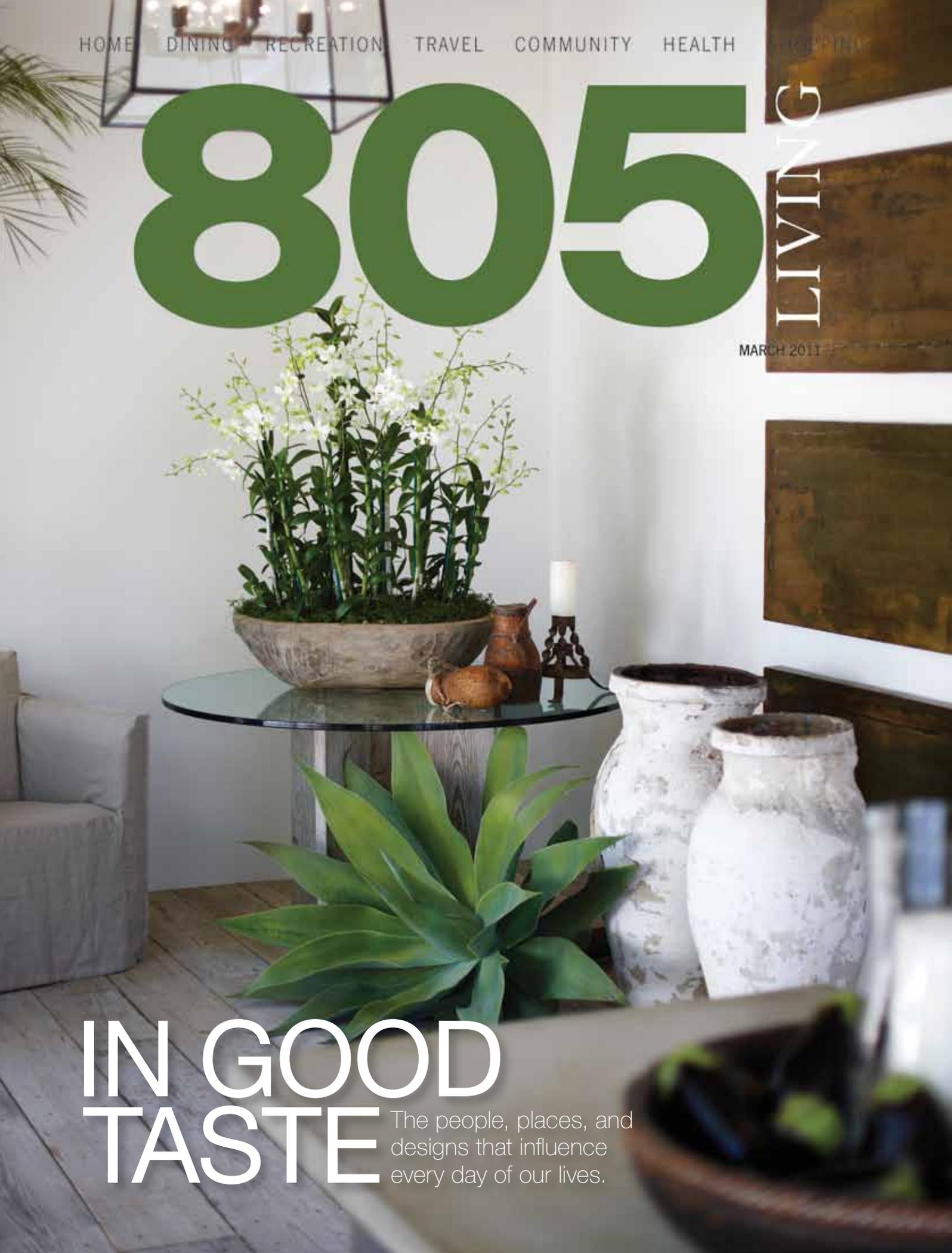


HOME DINING RECREATION TRAVEL COMMUNITY HEALTH

# 805

LIVING

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## IN GOOD TASTE

The people, places, and designs that influence every day of our lives.

In the spotlight: The shrimp po' boy topped with a house-made "Tater Tot" takes center stage; it's backed up by a Southern fried chicken slider. Both appear regularly at Alberto Vazquez's Rock Chef Rolls gourmet truck.





# Alberto **LIVE!** azquez

WITH A NEW MOBILE KITCHEN, THIS ROCK-STAR CHEF TAKES HIS CULINARY SHOW ON THE ROAD.

BY ANGELA PETTERA | PHOTOGRAPHS BY GARY MOSS



**THIS PAGE:** The self-described “wannabe rock star” in front of “the beast,” his 15,000-pound kitchen on wheels. Vazquez’s cooking is all over the place—in the most delicious way—rolling up on venues from Coachella to the Conejo Valley, and touching on flavors from the American South to Southern Italy to south-of-the-border.

**OPPOSITE:** Vazquez has a knack for developing concepts that are so fundamentally satisfying they’re inspired. Clockwise from top left: Pretzel bites with a four-cheese dip take downscale upscale; he amps up the Headbanger’s Meatball Sandwich with Italian sausage, *pomodoro* sauce, and Parmesan; business cards resemble concert tickets, making you feel like you’re attending an exclusive event; going to work with Vazquez is like having a backstage pass.

“I love ‘Tater Tots.’ I always have. My problem is, people serve ‘em too soggy. You gotta have ‘em crispy.”

Welcome to the other side of chef Alberto Vazquez. I got to know him as Mediterraneo’s executive chef. Sure, he always wore a bandana and a black chef’s coat at the sophisticated Italian restaurant, but his food was so refined that I never imagined he could slum it like this. Or, more to the point, I never imagined he would *admit* to loving those crispy, golden potato nuggets. Frankly, I adore them, too, but I don’t go around saying so in front of foodies. But then, I’m not Alberto. “I’m a character,” he admits. His edgy rock star look backs him up on this. “But people take me seriously when it comes to the cooking.” Also true.

He plunks down some deep-fried, house-made “Tater Tots” in front of me, sprinkles them with sea salt, and dabs a dot of chipotle ketchup on top of each one. The heat and vinegar of the sauce complement the mellow ‘tater flavor and cut through the fat nicely. These “Tots” are an integral part of Vazquez’s new venture called **Rock Chef Rolls: High-Voltage Gourmet Grub** (rockchefrolls.com). This tricked-out mobile kitchen will be rolling up on the Coachella weekend music and art festival in April and the Conejo Valley Days carnival in May, blaring rock music from its speakers, dispensing delicious handheld food from its serving window, and feeding Vazquez’s adrenaline and ego. “It fits my image and personality—that I’m a wannabe rock star.” Business cards emblazoned with his new logo on one side resemble concert tickets on the other. The title below his name reads “Executive Chef/Lead Vocals.” The card for his wife, Paula Weiser-Vazquez (of beautyhabit.com, the high-end online apothecary), lists her as the “Promoter.”





**THIS PAGE:** Vazquez rocking out inside his rig. “It was obvious that I needed to go off and do my own thing, to have quality time with my family, and call my own shots. I just had to go for it,” he says of recently leaving his post at Mediterraneo—and taking his cooking to the streets.

**OPPOSITE:** Pulled-pork *tostadita* with Latin slaw, avocado slices, lime wedges, and *cotija* cheese crumbles. The only thing missing? A margarita. The Rock Chef Rolls truck serves cocktails only at private parties but, says Vazquez, “I am quite the mixologist. Keep that in mind.” On the rocks, with salt, please.

She’s the main reason Vazquez left a comfortable job as a hotel chef to pursue his dream. “I wanted something more that was my own. I was inspired by my lovely wife, Paula. She’s been her own boss since she was 17.” Now he can call the shots. So, everyone who comes to work for him will be wearing a rock-and-roll uniform: black logo T-shirt, bandana, wallet chain, studded wristband, spiked hair, and eyeliner. “Alice Cooper-style eyeliner is a must,” he insists, for both male and female employees.

As long as those freaky kids are handing out shrimp po’ boys with Creole tartar sauce, I’m on board. I can also get behind the Southern fried chicken sliders on the Rock Chef Rolls menu. Vazquez marinates chicken breast pieces in buttermilk and Cajun spices, dredges them in seasoned flour, and deep-fries them. Then he snatches them out of the fryer and tucks them into soft, sweet slider buns to be topped with an arugula lettuce mix, tomato slices, and battered red-onion rings. Each mini sandwich gets a drizzle of Vazquez’s special, secret smoky sauce. As I bite into one, I can hear the twang of a southern guitar in my mind: *If You Want to Get to Heaven*.

Vazquez cooks south of the border, too. His pulled-pork *tostadita*, built on a tiny tostada shell, features adobo-marinated meat, a Latin slaw chock-full of cabbage, cilantro, lime, charred corn, and black beans along with roasted jalapeño pieces, avocado slices, and *cotija* cheese. Southern Italy is represented as well. Vazquez stuffs The Headbanger’s Meatball Sandwich with a giant ground-beef and Italian-sausage meatball, then douses it with *pomodoro* sauce. A slice of Parmesan is placed on top of the hot, saucy meatball to melt. These Headliners from the Rock Chef Rolls menu ring in around \$8 each. The Opening Acts like the “Tater Tots,” chewy pretzel bites with four-cheese sauce, and salty rosemary-garlic fries come in around \$5. Groupies (various items grouped together—get it?) are Vazquez’s version of a value meal. And the Encores are churro bites, doughnut holes, and gelato in waffle cones.

Those who don’t catch “the beast”—a 15,000-pound mobile kitchen pulled by Vazquez’s “bad-ass” Ford F-350—at a musical festival or carnival can book it for a corporate function or private party, since Rock Chef Rolls is versatile enough to crank out any style of food from carny fun to elegant plates. “It’s a big show on wheels,” he assures me. “It’s loud enough to roll up on your front door and make your party a hit.” ■

