

The Untapped Gold Mine of Taco Bell That Virtually No One Knows About

“I want a grilled chicken burrito, no ranch avocado sauce. Substitute fritos in for the avocado sauce.”

The cashier's fingers danced gracefully over the keypad substituting fritos for ranch-avocado sauce. Three quick key strokes and “+ 0.30” flashed in green digits on the register's display. Three key strokes, only three key strokes. Three buttons and already the “+ 0.30” flashed before him.

“I was, I want a spicy potatoes, I mean potato soft taco with fritos substituted in for creamy chipotle sauce. Grilled please.”

“Spicy potato soft taco, minus chipotle, plus fritos,” she repeated back. He noted the accuracy and professionalism in her mumbling.

“A shredded chicken mini quesadilla with fritos substituted in for creamy chipotle sauce, not grilled please.”

And again, this time not pausing in-between he recited his next line, “I want a bean ‘n cheese burrito, no red sauce no onions, grilled please. A fresco crunchy taco with no lettuce and extra pico.”

The boy's 10th-grade English teacher once confessed his fear of public speaking. “What about right now?” a girl asked. “That's the thing, I don't see you as my peers,” his teacher replied. While in college, the teacher was scheduled to give a speech on Alzheimer's, “by far the biggest of my life,” the teacher told them. “It was by far the biggest speech of my life. I practiced it dozens of times. I borrowed my friend's camcorder, recorded myself, and practiced, practiced, practiced. Memorized it word for word. When it came time to give the speech, not only were my *oration* and *jargon* flawless... but I was also able to relax and adapt to the audience. I told some of my best jokes during that speech.”

So too had the boy practiced.

“Fresco crunchy taco, no lettuce, extra pico.”

He carried on at his practiced pace. “I want a fourthmeal crunch wrap supreme. No nacho cheese, extra tomatoes subbed in for the nacho cheese, not grilled please.”

“That's it?”

“And a doritos loco taco no red sauce no onions, add guacamole and yeah.”

“That's it?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“\$18.98”

He payed in cash.

“Do you want your receipt?”

“Certain,” he coughed. “Certainly.”

The boy politely harassed the employee distributing trays of food while waiting for his order.

“Can I get a cup of water please?”

And “a handful of medium-spicy salsa,” a minute later.

And then, “Your ice machine on the left is broken.”

“It’s not broken it’s out of water.”

“Oh.”

“661!”

“Here.”

The boy grabbed the plastic bag and walked around out back to sit on drive thru’s curbside. His knees up and his legs crossed. His big, red adidas basketball shorts high up, mid-thigh to his dark-haired legs.

He carefully unwrapped the first item, “doritos locos,” and began dissecting.

The fork’s prongs lifted and combed the taco’s four ingredients: seasoned beef, cheese, lettuce, and yes, the guacamole extra. All four checked out. The shell was Nacho Cheese, there was some potential there, he had not specified the flavor of the shell.

Next up, fourthmeal crunchwrap.

Again no errors.

He shut his eyes and recited the order, “grilled chicken burrito, em avocado sauce, pee fritos, loaded potato griller, em creamy chipotle sauce, pee fritos, grilled, shredded mini quesadilla, em creamy chipotle sauce, pee fritos, not grilled, bean and cheese, em red sauce, grilled, fresco crunchy taco, em lettuce, extra pico de gallo, fourthmeal crunch wrap supreme, em cheese, extra tomatoes, not grilled, locos taco, em red, em onions, pee guac,...” his voice trailed off into a large swallow.

When he opened his eyes everything glistened.

Ahead of him was a pink fence, each board pristinely pink with a perfectly cut triangle on the top. It was a fence cared for by a person who cared. A good person. A person who lived next to Taco Bell and took care of their little pink fence and who could get fourthmeals and locos just by walking out back.

When he looked back down, at the food, it was more observantly this time. It was so pretty, so remarkable to think of. This bag, these wrapped and unwrapped items with beef glistening in the hot sunlight were materialized, alive and present because of his hard work. Yes, *his* work— *he* had done mother's chores. He had learned where cans and glass could and could not be recycled. The styrofoam could never be, never. He had done the separating very well, mother said.

But's best not to think of mother when she doesn't know where you're at.

He observantly noticed the receipt, still and sitting on his lap, had its customer survey lottery number still attached. He folded just below the asterisked line. This trick of cutting paper without scissors he was good at. This trick must'a gone all the way back to third grade. He would have been the best at it back then. He tore the receipt carefully tore along the folded crease. Xbox and Game Stop gift cards were among the prizes. Perfect. He tore it perfectly. He knew he'd always been good at this.

He clinched his fists and pressed them against the grass. Yes. Yes.

Pitting the receipt against his memory, "yes chicken, mini quesadilla," he muttered, running his finger down the list. "Checks out." The entire receipt matched the order committed to memory item-for-item.

So his cashier "Venessa J", as the receipt specified, was two for two and the items listed on the receipt checked out. So what he didn't care. The ingredients in the bag still needed to match the receipt. And there were still ample goods in the fat bag at his feet.

But the ingredients in the next two items also checked out.

Flakes of iceberg lettuce poked out from the chunky terrain of potato cubes. The spicy potato soft taco. This guy's ingredients checked out as well.

He picked out the fritos and transferred them into the fresco taco. In case he decided to make a move, he needed content for his case. He carefully folded the tortilla back together thinking longingly of the future day he would earn this taco, pull it from the refrigerator, microwave it, sink his teeth into it.

The 'Order Total: \$18.98', stamped on the receipt, was a bit less than half of last week's income, \$44.20, he knew this. And a bit less than half might just be acceptable, he thought,

probably, no, definitely acceptable for treats, not just any treats, especially important treats for his new-found positive outlook and optimism, like these treats. But all the same, treats that mother did not know about.

The boy pressed two flat palms tight against his face. “Look at Nick’s hands, he gets those from his grandma,” mother had said once after father made a comment comparing his enormous hands to Michael Jordan’s. “But he plays basketball like Charles Barkley,” his dad often said, “defense and rebounds. I love Chuck. He was such a class-act.” His dad squeezed him at his hip, “but Chuck had little hands so you’re like a Chuck with big hands.”

The boy cried into his big hands.

The skin-tight collection of little bones and tendons were more intricate than even his best of gaming controllers. But these amazing things were so worthless now. He had wasted them.

The wet tears rolled so quickly that it was all he could do to catch them before they scrunched his eyelashes. So bad. But the eyelashes scrunched all the same. So bad that he was unable to check if people were watching. *Why me? Why does this SHIT happen to me? Jesus please no longer ME.*

The tears rolled out of his empty, hungry frame in the hot sun. It was all he could manage to dry his eyes just long enough to peak out at the surrounding environment, and to check. Check if anyone knew where he was, that he was Nick from Clear Creek’s class of ‘09, or that he had worthless hands only good for rummaging behind Taco Bell.

But catching a glimpse of the pink fence made him sob harder.

Checking made him start over. Start over with crying, stopping crying, drying for long enough to check. And then starting over again.

But this time when he checked there was a lady sitting in a minivan. They made eye contact through his fingers. The lady’s face bore the concern of a mother. Somebody’s mother, he thought, only mothers can look like that. He cried uncontrollably with scrunched eyelashes. He did not wish for somebody’s mother to see him like this.

Jesus I’m yours I promise I’m yours if only please, let this last bean ‘n cheese have onions and I am yours. *Please Jesus please.*

But he couldn’t bring himself to unwrap his last hope.

Rather, he packed the bean n’ cheese with a shaky set of hands. Longing for the minivan lady to disappear, vanish, “go away, just *go away*”, he stood up not knowing where to walk, but careful not to look back, he decided on forward. He walked forward following the empty drive-thru. Ahead of the lady and her van. He followed the drive-thru and the drive-thru wound itself around the building, full-circle, leading him to the restaurant’s side-entrance. He knew what he had to do, the only thing a man could do in this shit, shitty, shit situation.

His confrontational side had been developed in high school wrestling. “Crab-walk!” coach Sans would shout. He and fifteen other wrestlers rolled from their stomachs onto their backs, from army-crawl to crab-crawl. Extended arms came down, hips up, and the boys scurried across the 3-inch mat-padded floor, some losing direction and hitting the mat-padded walls. “Eighty-five degrees!” Those cutting weight were wrapped in full-body sweat suits. Puddles of liquid pooled up and shined across the red mat. Crab-hands slipped in them. “Get nasty!” In between sets, coach Sans switched off the air so only their panting could be heard. His voice dropped in intimate conversation, “there’s a little sucker in your mind questioning this next set. Replace it for hate, hate for the wall on the other side of the room. Line up!” The whistle blew. This part he could do. He fucking hated that wall. He crab-walked to the north wall, socked it with an underhand and then turned his hate to the south wall. He bear-crawled to the south wall, hook-kicked it with the flat sole of his wrestling shoes, then dropped to an army-crawl and did the same to the north wall. “Bet Nick didn’t know you could rest while bear-walking! Nick learns something new every day!” Later when he applied the trick to his biology test, tactfully, he did well, inspiring him to use it on a lot of things, girls, school, arguments with his parents. “Tactful passion,” he called it. He had tried, had tried so very hard when faced with the decision of ‘vicodin and Halo’ or ‘just Halo’. But it’s hard to hate the only positive, stable thing that’s there for you.

He reminded himself of tactful passion.

His plan? To play it cool.

He wiped his red puffy eyes. “Are you Vanessa J?”

“Uhhh, yeah...”

“I believe you just took my order,”

“Yep!”

“... okay. Yeah, and I believe the cooks in the back got something wrong.”

“Yep!”

“My locos taco was supposed to be cool ranch.”

“I’m sorry, can I take a look?” she grabbed the receipt from his outstretched hand. “Look here, you ordered a regular flavored doritos locos taco.” She was busy with orders and spoke quickly.

“Yeah I wanted cool ranch.”

“But I just took your order, I don’t think you said cool ranch.”

“Who gets this complexity? Who even does that?”

“Sorry?”

“No look, there is another,” he wiped his eyes, “another wrong thing, here look.” He held receipt flat against the counter now so both he and Vanessa could read it with tilted heads.

“Yes?”

He ran his finger over the items, “spicy potato soft taco was supposed to have fritos. It didn’t have any.”

“Look, we understand what you do. We made sure that your order was correct.”

“I’ve, I no that’s not fair. I have the taco right here.”

“I’m sorry we have to take our next customer now.”

Tactful passion. He held his temper and told her firmly: “That’s not fair. I expect to get what I ordered.”

“Zach!”

A cook came from the back. A metal plate pinned to his polo, ‘Zach’.

“Zach did you put fritos in this?”

“What’s that,” he grabbed the receipt.

“Spicy potato taco, did you put fritos in it?”

“Lemme see,”

“Doesn’t matter what he says. I have my spicy potato taco. Zero fritos.”

“Yep I remember putting them in.”

“Who even gets that complexity. My order, who even gets it right?” The boy began crying.

“So you’re admitting I got it right?”

“No! Look at the taco.” With shaking hands he removed the spicy potato taco and placed it on the counter. “You see, no fritos.”

“You probably ate them all, we know what you do,” the cashier said. “We know what you do. You aint getting any free food. Not on my watch.”

“Maybe I can fix one up,” Zach commented.

“He’s done this at least five times now,” the girl replied loudly. Those behind him in line were there to witness. He did not want to be witnessed. He did not want to be talking to Vanessa J. Vanessa J did not understand him like the drive-thru lady in the minivan did, not even close.

The boy’s fist came down hard onto the counter, smashing into the nacho cheese doritos loco taco.

“Fuck you I don’t need your food! I’m a rookie and it’s a free country!” he slapped the crumbled shell and seasoned beef across the counter. “See no fritos, no fritos,” he sobbed, mashing the ingredients through his fingers, “I’m a rookie and it’s a FREE COUNTRY!”

The customers behind him cleared out of the way. He opened the glass door, but turned back one last time, “Fuck YOU,” his aggressive voice had no tactful passion, no trace of restraint. Turning back to flick her off, he saw her grin. Her’s was a devil grin, he hated so much that it was beautiful and hated so much that his meanest rage could do nothing to remove it and he was so, so helpless now.

Out on the open Muscatine Avenue, he ran for it. He ran the length of his hometown and not one inch of it gave one little measly shit about how he felt inside. He kept running until his legs were nothing more than the mushed, triple-wrapped wad of burritos and tacos squeezed under his arm.

He ran and did not stop.

When Newport bridge came into view, he slowed to a jog, and then a walk. His mind pulsed with mother’s face, facing his own guilty baby face, so guilty, when mother found empty whipped-cream canisters. *“You haven’t been using these for? I read online they could be used for that. Oh Nicky. No Nicky no.”* He could hear her vocal chords go sour with each scream. The type of scream he had publicly laid bare in Taco Bell, to Vanessa J whose only response was a smug grin, to people who maybe knew his of his family. He had to scream like that after being screamed at like that. Nobody could hold that in. Nobody could grin it off.

Giving up on the what-building-would-I-rather-be game, the boy sat on the edge of Hendrickson’s bridge, his back against the guard rail and legs crisscrossed. He had sweat-soaked half his T-shirt. He had cold, mushed mix of burritos and tacos for a week because he had a turdbiscuit brain, unable adapt to new situations.

He pulled out the bean n’ cheese. What had been his last hope behind Taco Bell. But what didn’t matter anymore. He unrolled the tortilla and let it fall open.

He saw them there. The small, clearish chunks inside the mass of brown beans sparkled in sunlight.

He tore through the rest of the bag, searching, fumbling for the receipt. He needed the receipt. Was it Zach or Vanessa J, which one. Was Vanessa a fake piece of shit all along. He found the receipt scrunched up in his pocket. Bean Burrito, - Red Sauce. Vanessa J had not clicked 'minus' nor had she clicked 'onions'.

He wrapped the shit-stained tortilla into a round ball of mush and stood up so as to put shoulder and leg weight into the throw. When he cocked back his right arm, a gray minivan spotted the boy from the oncoming lane, a female driver, somebody's mother, oncoming towards his face, so too did he spot her, linking eye contact, she saw the boy's face of tears and rage, she saw the boy pivot athletically on a planted foot, making a full quarter turn by the time his right arm fell across his torso in a fully extended follow-through, timed such that the forty-mile-per-hour projectile splattered evenly across the side door's tempered glass window passing by at thirty miles-per-hour.

Now it was the boy's turn to watch her. He watched as somebody's mother drove the remaining length of the bridge, as the lane in front of him remained cleared, and as somebody's mother turned a tight U-turn around the bridge's concrete median. He wedged the toes of his New Balance sneakers into an open slab on the guard rail's otherwise flat barrier, using the foothold in conjunction with a lamppost to boost himself up onto the barrier's 3-inch wide, flat upper pane, with his right arm still fastly gripped to the lamppost for balance. Facing the minivan, with the river to his left and sidewalk to his right, he saw the lady's face sink with disappointment and concern, just as the lady slammed on her horn.

The boy's legs convulsed as he fell the ten meters down into the water, thirty meters upstream from the hydropower station's churning wheels.

"You didn't see him? You didn't hear my honk?"

The lady screamed through her window at the passing college student.

"Christ! What'd you honk for?"

"Oh my god."

"I saw him! But I was trying to be discrete."

The lady was not the same lady from the Taco Bell drive-thru, nor was she somebody's mother. Both she and the passing student were aware of that summer's news story, in which a drunk teenager died on this bridge trying to impress his girlfriend, as they dialed 911 and pointed outwards at his quickly-drifting body struggling to stay surfaced and reassured one another, "he'll make it", "he's gotta make it!"