



# Culinary Corner

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## REVIEW



Bobby Cochran/CW photos

Enjoy the fresh flavors of Mojo Bay on the small but charming patio overlooking the lake.

### MOJO BAY

★★★ out of 5

Location: Shoppes at University Place, 8933 J.M. Keynes Drive

Phone: 704-717-7177; Fax: 704-717-7170

Price range: \$2.95-\$7.95. Fish of the day is market priced.

Hours: Monday through Thursday, 11 a.m.-midnight; Friday and Saturday, 11-1 a.m.; Sunday, noon to midnight.

Details: Patio dining; no smoking in the dining room until after 10 p.m.; \$5 lunch specials weekdays from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.

For more information: Visit [www.gomojobay.com](http://www.gomojobay.com).

in addition to a host of specialty entrées, a fresh fish of the day and Withee's take on Caribbean-style rotisserie chicken.

You will sorely miss out if you don't start with Mojo's homemade guacamole. Made tableside specifically to patrons' liking, it just doesn't get any fresher. I love the chunky blend of three avocados because I could order it without garlic or onions. To me guacamole is about the rich, cool taste of ripe avocados, and I hate when places spice it up or purée it with a stretcher of sour cream. At Mojo the guacamole is the real thing; served with a basket of warm chips, it is nearly perfect.

Other favorites at the table were the fried plantains and the collard greens served as a side. The

## Get your Mojo on

A taste of the Caribbean comes to University City

by Heidi Billotto  
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It's not visible from the road. Nor can you see it from the University Place parking lot off J.M. Keynes Drive. Tucked in the corner of the shopping complex in a spot across a courtyard from Boardwalk Billy's, Mojo Bay stands in apparent disregard for the famed advice of realtors: location, location, location.

Partners Jeff Van Dyke, David Withee and Jamie Jenkins knew that the University City location of their newest restaurant would be difficult for people to find. Chef Withee, General Manager Jenkins and Van Dyke, who also is a partner in the Brix chain of restaurants, banked on the fact that customers leaving Boardwalk Billy's, the trio's other University City restaurant, would see Mojo across the way and be intrigued enough to give it a try.

Mojo opened nearly two months ago. Although word of great margaritas, homemade guacamole and tasty fish tacos is getting out, the owners admit it has been a slow start.

Yet Mojo Bay is worth seeking. The restaurant is one of the few chef-driven, nonchain dining spots in the area. Withee, who also is executive chef at Boardwalk Billy's, explains that one of the things he thinks sets Mojo Bay apart from the rest is his "from-scratch" kitchen.

"We make everything fresh and from scratch here, from the sour mix used at the bar to the pico de gallo sauce served at the table. Nothing comes in frozen or pre-prepared."

Mojo Bay is the proud home to Charlotte's only sugarcane press, so Mojitos and other bar specialties generally sweetened with simple syrup are mixed at Mojo with fresh *guarapa* or sugarcane juice. The bar also sports a trio of fruity house-infused liqueurs, fresh-squeezed lemon and lime juice and homemade sangria in addition to 30 varieties of tequila and 20 varieties of rum. The La Limonada, made with sugarcane juice, lemon juice and soda water, provides a refreshing change of pace for those interested in a nonalcoholic beverage. A similar drink made with lime juice is served in much the same blend. Both may be enjoyed frozen or on the rocks.

### Ariba, ariba

The food at Mojo is an interesting mix of Latin cuisines, which Withee admits might lean a bit more toward Mexican than Caribbean. Still, the menu covers a spectrum of flavor.

"We modeled Mojo after a lot of places we loved: Anntony's Caribbean Chicken, Cabo Fish Taco and a number of Charlotte's little-known Mexican taquerias. We tried lots of things outside of the city, too, and then blended our favorite flavors into a concept all our own," Withee said.

Mojo's menu features appetizers, salads and sides



Go for the guacamole at Mojo Bay. It's made tableside specifically to your liking and served with warmed chips.

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I recommend ending your meal at Mojo Bay with one of two types of *tres leches*: either the traditional coconut-infused cake or Chef Withee's chocolate version of the same. Both are served with fresh strawberries, grilled pineapple and a dollop of whipped cream.

greens, slow-cooked and seasoned with applewood-smoked bacon, truly melt in your mouth. The slightly sweet plantains were soft and tender. Both offerings are delicious.

The fish of the day, a mahi-mahi the night of my visit, was quite nice as well. Whatever the evening's selection, the seafood steak or fillet is lightly seasoned and grilled, then served with a

specialty salsa on the side.

The tacos come in eight choices to mix and match. Most are served on tasty white, soft corn tortillas just the way it's done south of the border. Because the tortillas are small, consider ordering several for a blend of flavors.

The two styles of fish taco are both excellent. The concept of a fish taco first came from the Baja region of California. The Sierra fish taco at Mojo takes a traditional route filled with crispy, full-flavored Sierra Nevada beer-battered fish, a zesty Caribbean slaw and a drizzle of cilantro-lime sauce. Pair it with the mahi taco and you've got a winning combination. This second fish taco features grilled, ancho-rubbed fresh mahi-mahi, the same Caribbean slaw and a tasty salsa verde. Tacos, which also come stuffed with a variety of chicken, pork and steak, may be ordered individually or teamed with red rice and beans to make a taco platter. The rice is baked with tomato, onion and cilantro, whereas the Mexican-style pinto beans, called charro beans at Mojo, are cooked with applewood-smoked bacon, onions and serrano chiles.

### In the eyes of the beholder

Disappointments at Mojo were few

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### Mojo Bay

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but included two appetizers and the featured rotisserie chicken. First was the ceviche, a starter made of shrimp and fresh fish. The seafood is marinated in citrus juice to “cook” and is then tossed with tomatoes, jicama, onions, avocado, chiles, cucumber and cilantro. Although the colorful combo delivered in a martini glass made a fun presentation, onion was unfortunately the predominant flavor. There was much more shrimp than fish, and I found both to have a rubbery texture most likely caused by overmarinating.

We also tried the Rajas queso. The gratin of melted cheese is mixed with roasted peppers and onions. This dish wasn't bad – it was just difficult to eat and too oily for my taste. I'll stick with the guacamole any day.

As for the chicken, the half or quarter bird served with a side of island rice was a generous portion but lacked real flavor. The homemade jerk sauce was too spicy; the rice, spiked with pineapple, green onions and cilantro, was too sweet. The combination didn't blend well for me. The jerk sauce came generously smeared atop the chicken but its punch was only skin deep. Although the chicken was moist and tender, the taste of the sauce didn't cook through.



Grilled or deep fried, the beer-battered fish tacos at Mojo Bay are really top-notch.

#### A room with a view

One of the best things about Mojo Bay, aside from the *tres leche* cake for dessert, is the small but appealing patio that overlooks the picturesque lake at University Place. The lake is home to paddleboats, a charming boardwalk and a host of waterfowl. While it's not exactly like being in the Caribbean, it's close enough for now. □