

Boulder bite: Cantina Laredo

Chain restaurant at its finest

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Chain restaurants elicit different feelings for every individual. Some people avoid them at all costs, while others look forward to their familiarity and consistency. The 29th Street Mall has adopted a new eatery called Cantina Laredo that embodies the chain restaurant persona in every possible way.

It was a quiet Tuesday night when my guest and I strolled through Cantina Laredo's revolving doors. Suddenly we were in a dimly lit, bustling world of Latin music, potent aromas and apron-wearing employees. Not one, but four beaming hostesses greeted us at the door, and we were guided to a table in the midst of great hustle and bustle.

"Of the 26 Cantina Laredo branches, we came in second as far as business on opening night," said General Manager Robbie Wright.

The restaurant was definitely hopping for a Tuesday night. Customers were packed into the restaurant and were enjoying plates of enormous Mexican dishes.

"Our food is gourmet Mexican. It's food you won't necessarily find elsewhere in this country. Our plating is authentic and our sauces are made fresh every day," Wright said.

In keeping with chain restaurant protocol, Cantina Laredo's menu is significant in size and designed to please a wide range of tastes. Picky eaters can order a simple cheese quesadilla, while a more sophisticated palate may prefer something like a carne asada.

Our server, Breana Ross, was able to provide several recommendations. We started with the Top Shelf Guacamole (\$8.99), which is prepared fresh at the table. Ross arrived with a large tray of avocados, cilantro, diced tomatoes, red onions, jalapenos and spices. Then she proceeded to mix everything together into a sizeable bowl of guacamole. It was fresh and delicious.

While munching on the guacamole, I took note of my surroundings. Peering around dozens of darting servers, I saw modern architecture, a cozy fireplace and large tables filled with parents and young children. According to Cantina Laredo's [Web site](#), the restaurant serves "authentic Mexican food in a sophisticated atmosphere." Yet somewhere along the lines, it seemed as though sophistication had gone awry.

Just as I was trying to put chain restaurant and sophistication in the same sentence, a large plate of Ceviche (\$8.99) arrived. Ceviche is a traditional Peruvian dish of seafood that is cured (not cooked) in citrus (usually lime) juice. I peered deeper into the food in front of me, observing what looked nothing like any Ceviche I'd ever had. The taste was recognizable, but something was amiss; was it the fact that green olives and capers overpowered what was supposed to be a seafood-celebratory dish?

Still pondering this thought, I took a break to eat a chip. It was then that the rest of our food arrived sizzling

and piping hot. My guest Cassidy, who is a committed vegetarian, ordered the Vegetarian Enchiladas (\$10.99).

Unfortunately, finding vegetarian options is not easy at Cantina Laredo. They are only on a separate, hidden menu that people must ask for. According to Wright, this vegetarian menu is not available at any other of the restaurant's locations.

"We've designed our restaurant to cater to this location because we make an effort to give back to the community by being sustainable," Wright said. He added that at the Boulder branch they use especially strict recycling practices.

After my puzzling encounter with Ceviche and my adventure with the vegetarian menu, I was excited to prepare my very own fajitas (\$15.49 for a chicken/beef combo). I began with beef, topped it with grilled onions and bell peppers, Mexican rice, refried beans and sour cream. It tasted just like a fajita should taste.

After my second wrap I gave way to my thoughts for a moment. Perhaps this is why chain restaurants are so popular among some; one can expect familiar foods to taste just like they've always tasted. My fajita was succulent and savory, but nothing out of the ordinary. For \$16, I couldn't help but wonder if I could have perhaps prepared it myself.

Cassidy's vegetarian enchiladas were another story. Chock-full of every vegetable in the garden and covered with salsa verde (green salsa), they carried potential. Yet with no cheese, beans or any delights, the enchiladas came out rather bare.

As we were working our way through the large plates of food, Ross returned at least three times to ask us how everything was. After the first time, we were pleased with her attentiveness. After the second, we were astonished and after the third, annoyed. And during the last portion of our mealtime, she asked us more than once if we'd like our food boxed.

"Our corporate slogan is 'Happy to do it,'" Wright said. "Happy is a state of mind, doing is an action, and 'it' refers to anything a customer may need. We have very high hiring standards based on this slogan."

But the overwhelmingly attentive service we received unfortunately reached the point of annoyance. Perhaps this is due to the restaurant's young age. The night we went was opening night, so servers are likely still enthusiastic about their jobs. Perhaps after a few weeks to settle down, the service won't be as overwhelming.

If you're the kind of person who likes chain restaurants, by all means try Cantina Laredo. While it may not live up to its dreams of fine dining, it does offer variety, familiarity and a lively atmosphere.

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