



A La Carte: Cantina Laredo

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By G.A. Benton

Cantina Laredo 8791 Lyra Dr., Polaris 614-781-1139 Web: cantinalaredo.com



JODI MILLER PHOTO

Fiesta Grill and Enchiladas de Mole

There is a type of "galleta-cutter" Mexican restaurant very prevalent in Columbus that's a peso a dozen. Cantina Laredo isn't one of those, but you could spend many dozens of pesos eating your way through this pricey-side establishment.

So I'm going to tip you off to a couple of good deal highlights embedded in the menu of this self-described purveyor of "gourmet Mexican food."

Situated in Polaris Fashion Place, Cantina Laredo is an ambitious Texas-based chain that doesn't look like your typical tropically toned and sombrero-scattered restaurante. No, its modern and spacious setting uses pampering booths, a large curvy bar, hushed lighting and an abundance of blond wood to say "upscale" and "anti-cliche."

If Cantina Laredo's grub doesn't always eschew Mexican food cliches, it often improves on them vastly. Take the free, first-rate, light and crispy chips and their accompanying roasted salsas (note the plural - you get both a piquant, served-warm tomatillo dip and a bright and fruitier chilled tomato one); these are easily some of the best chips and salsa in town.

Are you a fajitas fan? Well Laredo's Fiesta Grill will shatter and eclipse your expectations of that ubiquitous cast-iron dish of tricked-out sizzling meat clumps. The feeds-two stunner (\$23) is an overwhelming platter of seared peppers and onions topped with an absolute mountain of grill-marked meat.

Yeah, there's chicken (marinated, tender), beef (juicy, flatiron steak tasting) and shrimp (tail-on, sweet), but also costillas (crispy pork ribs), Laredo's version of carnitas (fantastic - a huge, falling off its bone hunk of tender piggy swabbed in a wonderfully pungent "chipotle wine sauce") and the piece de resistance, an absolutely fabulous - and all-too-rare - perfectly grilled whole quail. Yes, I said quail!

If a massive and crazy great carnival of carnivorous delights is not your thing, then I'd point you toward Laredo's crazy great Enchiladas de Mole (\$13). Unlike most local takes on the chocolate-inflected version of mole, Laredo's actually tastes like something I've eaten in Mexico.

It's a rich, nutty, highly complex sauce with spot-on notes of raisins (from reconstituted chili anchos) and bittersweet chocolate. The sauce comes (and this is traditionally correct) sprinkled with sesame seeds and slathered on tortillas - you get two long biggies - filled with juicy stewed chicken meat.

Both of these meals, like most entrees, come with above-average Mexican rice and beans (go with the borrachos - beer soaked whole pintos), and the Fiesta Grill comes with tortillas (ask for corn) plus the usual on-the-side fajita fixins like sour cream, pico de gallo (with diced jicama in it) and good guacamole.