



Mexican Gone Gourmet - Cantina Laredo

Annie Beecham

8791 Lyra Dr. Columbus, OH (614) 781-1139

WHAT: Cantina Laredo introduces an interesting concept to the Polaris Lifestyle Expansion: gourmet Mexican food served in an upscale environment. It has all the parts and parcels of an ordinary Mexican joint, but there is something else that is persistent in the ambiance, making it a type of restaurant with no exact comparison in Columbus. Qualities like the open and bright interior, doting wait staff, tableside guacamole service and generally good vibe—plus the quality and care put into the dishes, are the ingredients that make for a pleasantly relaxing experience at Cantina Laredo.

WHO: Mexican restaurants have a way of inducing good times, and Cantina Laredo has the same infectious vibe. Polaris shoppers will enjoy the warm atmosphere, replete with modern Mexican tunes purring subtly in the background. You're in the seasoned care of GM Michael BelCastro, who brings decades of experience in the industry, and the executive chef, Ruben Lozano, holds more than 30 years involvement with the company. Born and raised in Mexico, he knows the cuisine well.

WHEN: Cantina Laredo is open for lunch and dinner every day of the week. It's easily accessible to Polaris shoppers and others, and it will probably maintain an ability to perk up moods at all times. A private room is available for groups of up to 30, while the actual restaurant can seat as many as 300. If you're hosting a celebración at home, the restaurant offers catering services.

WHERE: The restaurant is one of several that laid claim to a stake in Polaris' new outdoor Lifestyle Expansion in 2009. The educated population and sophisticated pallet of the people of Columbus are several of the reasons why the owners chose to bring the chain to the city, which is based in Dallas. When you visit the restaurant, ask to sit on the enclosed patio. Even in cold weather, it maintains its warm atmosphere, literally and figuratively. Surrounded by large windows, you'll not only catch that infectious Mexican good-time feeling, but you'll soak up some Vitamin D and temporarily forget the Midwest weather. If it's a cloudy day, you might choose to sit inside near the centrally located fireplace at a booth or table, and the bar offers lots of seating, too.

THE TEST: Cantina Laredo masters the ability to serve dishes with visual appeal that equals their pronounced flavor, and that can



sometimes be hard to do with Mexican, a cuisine that is notably heavy on ingredients that are hard to dress up on a plate—beans, rice and cheese, to name a few. With each menu item, we were impressed with the care and creativity of presentation. We also appreciated that the dishes were not submerged in a toxic orange sea of queso.

The Top Shelf Guacamole is prepared at your table by an astute member of the wait staff who has been trained to prepare a perfectly seasoned bowl of the green stuff. This tableside show should inspire you to test your hand at making your own guacamole at tu casa. It's top-shelf, indeed.

You have to see the Camaron Poblano Asada to believe it. It defies food presentation rationale by placing sautéed shrimp, mushrooms, onions and Monterrey jack cheese inside of a 6-inch long green poblano pepper. But wait, there's more. The stuffed pepper is then wrapped with a thick carne asada steak. The whole package is placed on a bed of green chimichurri sauce and accompanied by sautéed vegetables and rice. And once you slice into this neat little parcel, you'll realize that it's better than any wrapped package you've ever before been gifted.

The Pescado del Dia features the fresh fish of the day, which could be halibut, mahi-mahi, swordfish, salmon, sea bass or other fish that is available. We enjoyed the sea bass, a rich, thick fillet, with jalapeno bierre blanc otop. It's served with a mix of sautéed zucchini, green beans, potatoes, carrots, rice and almond slivers. Paired with a glass of the Caymus Conundrum white wine, this meal captures the concept of gourmet Mexican.

Cantina Laredo gets creative with their kitchenware by creating a dessert that takes advantage of the sizzle of a fajita skillet. Order the Mexican Apple Pie, and your server will arrive with a slice of apple pie, placed on a blazing hot skillet, topped with a scoop of cinnamon ice cream. Then, the show begins. The skilled server pours a saucer of brandy butter sauce over top. As it hits the skillet, the sauce sizzles and emits the most wonderful scent of warm apple pie, cinnamon and sweet brandy.

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