

Gulfshore Life

Good and Spicy

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Arturo brawn is a force to be reckoned with. Originally from Mexico City, he's been with Cantina Laredo for nine years.

"It's in a different class," he said while grinding up a batch of fresh Top Shelf Guacamole (\$9.49) for us tableside with a mortar and pestle. We sipped a couple of decadent Casa Rita margaritas (made with Sauzo Blanco tequila, Cointreau orange liqueur and fresh-squeezed lemon and lime juices, \$9 each) and breathed in the wonderfully pervasive chipotle aroma emanating from our salsa.

Confession time. Tom and I are so pro-independent restaurant that we can be a touch anti-corporate. We root for the little guy, who often has the better product. As Cantina Laredo is a nationwide chain with 29 outlets in the United States and one in Abu Dhabi, we had come with mixed feelings.



"The best Mexican food is usually in some tiny hole in the wall with year-round Christmas lights," Tom whispered.

"Let's try to keep an open mind," I said. "They must have a winning formula of some kind."

"What would you say makes Cantina Laredo stand out from the crowd?" Tom asked Arturo.

"The others have a lot of hats. This is Mexican gourmet," Arturo explained with real pride. He had been brought to the Fort Myers store from Branson, Mo., to teach everyone the proper form for the Flaming Coffee (\$10.29), a Cantina Laredo delicacy that he urged us to try with dessert. "In Branson, everybody performs all the time.

It's like a show every night!"

We spotted our new neighbors, Steve and Edita, waiting in the lobby and waved them over. Hats or no hats, Mexican cuisine always suggests a fiesta. We were glad to invite the tall, charismatic Fort Myers tennis pro and his lovely Slovakian wife to join us for some impromptu festivities. Steve had just finished giving a lesson and had clearly worked up an appetite. They scooted into our booth and marveled at the mini banquet Arturo had assembled for us: the guacamole (which lived up to its name), plus some flavorful *sopa de tortilla* (\$5.99 cup/\$8.49 bowl) and a *botanas* platter (\$13.99), a generous sampler featuring tacos *al pastor*, chicken fajita quesadillas, chili con queso, stuffed jalapenos, beef fajita, chicken fajita and shrimp. The botanas was a towering feast of kabob-like structures, supper for two in and of itself.

"Where's Charlie?" Edita asked. Our one-year-old son had inspired our introduction during one of our evening strolls through the neighborhood, and Edita and Charlie bonded immediately. Our son has a special knack for picking up beautiful chicas.

"We're actually here on official business. Maybe you could help us?" Tom handed him a plate.

"I can't believe you do this for work." Steve helped himself to some chicken quesadilla.

"Almost as amazing as playing tennis well enough to get paid to play," I said. "I've been playing for 30 years, and I'm still a struggling intermediate."

"Tell you what," Steve said. "You let me taste that guacamole and I'll help you with your backhand."

I elbowed Tom. "Pass the guac, hon."

For the center court exhibition, Tom ordered the shrimp fajitas (\$17.99)—not on the menu, but Arturo hooked us up—while I decided to order the beef enchiladas (\$10.29), large, soft, stuffed tortillas. Steve and Edita helped us select entrées that took us slightly outside of our sphere of comfort. To be neighborly, we added shrimp flautas (\$15.29), small, crisp-fried and stuffed tortillas, and the *camaron poblano asada* (\$21.49), a complex dish with "sautéed shrimp, mushrooms, onions and Monterey Jack inside a poblano pepper wrapped in a carne asada steak on a bed of chimichurri sauce."

As Steve attacked the poblano layer by layer, I noted that it looked like an archeological dig.

The verdict on the food was that it was good and spicy. The menfolk appreciated the cook's heavy hand with the heat, but the womenfolk would have preferred more muted spicing. Our tastes in sweets diverged more minutely, so we asked Arturo to bring us four *postres*: the Mexican brownie (\$6.29), served hot with pecans, Mexican brandy butter and vanilla or cinnamon ice cream; the flan (\$5.29), a traditional Mexican delicacy served with caramel sauce; the chocolate cake (\$6.99), a dense confection with ice cream and chocolate sauce; and the Mexican apple pie (\$6.29), served in a skillet with Mexican brandy butter and cinnamon and vanilla ice cream. Everyone chose a different favorite; I was smitten with the apple pie. The only dessert we didn't try was the apple-filled crepes (\$5.99) with *cajeta* sauce, Kahlua, Grand Marnier, candied pecans and vanilla ice cream—and that was because we figured we'd get enough of the hard stuff from Arturo's Flaming Coffee.

Arturo was right: The Flaming Coffee made it dinner and a show. He handled a glass upside down and right side up, filling it at various intervals with alcohol and fire. It was easy to see why you might need special training for the beverage. I'd be sure to set myself and/or the house on fire if I tried it at home, and I'd probably lose most of the rich liquid to our tile floor after all the ingredient juggling and glass windmilling. Yet by the time Arturo set the drink before us with four tiny straws, it looked positively sedate with its whipped cream topping.

In the end, we all agreed that it hardly mattered if there was a Cantina Laredo in almost every town from here to Branson. It made for a winning introduction to our neighborhood.

Cantina Laredo, Bell Tower Shops, 5200 Big Pine Way, Fort Myers; (239) 415-4424, www.cantinalaredo.com. Open Sunday through Friday 11 a.m. to 10 p.m., Saturday 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Happy hour daily 4–7 p.m. Reservations recommended. Free parking. Credit cards accepted. Wheelchair accessible.