

Cantina Laredo / Plantation

By JUDITH STOCKS June 13, 2008

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★★★★☆ If you like sequined sombreros and neon *cerveza* signs with your tacos, plan on bringing your own to Cantina Laredo — one of a handful of places that rises above the usual south of the border routine.

It's not every day you can walk into a Mexican restaurant and have guacamole prepared tableside, shrimp marinated in Cuervo Gold, and feel the heat of flames right under your nose as your flan gets the flambé treatment.

All of which is part of the culinary drama that turns this into a restaurant deserving bonus points for trying harder, starting with a handsome facility dolled up by a color palette lifted straight off a desert sunset. Intimate booths and tasteful accouterments lend an upscale feel, and the repertoire is a lineup of sophisticated fare that emphasizes dramatic pyrotechnics.

Order shrimp cocktail (\$11.99) and it's all about tableside presentation. Ditto on top shelf guacamole (\$8.99), for an up close and personal opportunity to watch avocados get hand mashed. Ingredients for the shrimp cocktail, five meaty shrimp, cilantro, onions and jalapenos, are lined up in individual bowls on a tableside tray. One by one, each is dumped into a cocktail shaker holding a fresh tomato mixture spiked with Cuervo Gold. The server places a glass over the shaker, tosses it a few times and in two seconds the contents are poured into a lettuce-lined stemmed glass. We had to fish for the shrimp, but it's worth wading through the flavorful sauce.

An \$11.99 salad of cubed grilled chicken, mushrooms, bacon, avocados and tomatoes needs more *cotija* cheese but is a fine light entree. What sets it apart is the tang from chimichurri sauce, albeit one with minimum garlic. Or, raspberry spinach salad (\$10.69) has chicken, roasted almonds, mushrooms and *cotija*, ignited by raspberry chipotle dressing sparked by the fuel of smoked jalapenos.

A fiesta mixed grill (\$25.99) serves as an excellent reminder that there's more to sizzling platters than fajitas. The feast includes a handful of shrimp in various sizes, yummy *costillas* (a couple of ribs slathered in Cuervo Gold tequila barbecue sauce); terrific braised pork shanks topped with lip-tingling chipotle wine sauce, quail, and beef and chicken fajitas with beef that's agreeably chewy skirt steak.

Chile rellenos is a lightly battered, fried poblano fattened by tasty picadillo stuffing — ground beef and pork highlighted by almonds and raisins. The cheese version is \$11.89, one with ranchera sauce, \$12.99. Enchiladas Veracruz (\$11.99) bulges with chicken and bright green fresh spinach, but not enough Monterey jack. A light tomatillo sauce and *cotija* enhance it, but the best part is the accompaniment — vinaigrette-marinated fresh red bliss potatoes, green beans, zucchini, carrots, onions and mushrooms dusted with almonds.

I don't want to shower this fiesta with a thunderstorm, but service was less than attentive. In a restaurant with up-sells on the menu, it's disappointing when they're not even mentioned. Our flan (\$4.99) could have been flambéed tableside for \$7.99. Take charge and go for the gusto of having yours flambéed, then enjoy its luscious caramel sauce complimented by a fresh orange wedge. And, if you've never experienced Mexican apple pie, this one sizzles in Mexican brandy butter (\$6.29).

A wide range of liquid refreshments includes signature tequilas, tequila flights, and margaritas — or something from the wine list. Then again, maybe just a cup of steaming, cinnamon-laced coffee is the perfect companion for your Mexican evening.

Please call to confirm hours, prices, menu items and facilities. For review consideration, fax a current menu that includes the name and address of restaurant to 954-356-4386 or send to Sun-Sentinel, 200 E. Las Olas Blvd., Fort Lauderdale, FL 33301-2293.

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