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RESTAURANTS Cantina Laredo is Mexican with a luxe touch

BY JENNIFER CHRISTMAN

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LITTLE ROCK — One would never guess by its interior that Cantina Laredo, the second restaurant to open in the Midtowne Little Rock shopping center, is a Mexican restaurant.

Contemporary and clean without a serape or sombrero in the house, the Arkansas outlet of a Texas-based chain with locations in nine states looks like it could serve any kind of cuisine in its chic, spacious dining room of cozy booths and sleek chairs with the lighting - if not the noise level - for romance. (OK, so the larger than normal tequila selection at the bar might be a tip-off.)

And one would never guess Cantina Laredo was a Mexican restaurant by looking at the prices. There is not a dinner entree below \$10. In fact, most of the lunch entrees are more than \$10.

Tequila aficionados can spend \$46 on a serving of Herradura Seleccion Suprema. Less particular sippers can settle for a house Casa Rita (\$8), made with Sauza Silver tequila, Cointreau orange liqueur and fresh squeezed lemon and lime juice. We got no buzz, just a lot of lime flavor in our salted, on-the-rocks concoctions. (Perhaps we could have two of them on a Thursday when Ladies' Night makes margaritas and glasses of wine half-price.) The sangria (\$5) was nothing special but looked pretty in a tall glass, garnished with a cherry and orange slice.

Tortilla chips and robust, unusual salsa are complimentary. (Careful! The two bowls might look like the same thing, but one is quite hot and also sour, and servers don't always point out the difference.) But expect to dig deep if you want additional "aperitivos." For example, the Queso Laredo dip, made of cheese, spiced taco meat and pico de gallo, is tasty, but for \$8.29? A friend said it best: "Good, but I've had it at every potluck and tailgate party I've ever been to."

A bowl of two avocados is perched on each table as a prop that servers use to entice diners to try the Top Shelf Guacamole (\$9.49), which is mixed fresh at the table with the server adding ingredients like tomatoes, cilantro and onions to taste. It's a somewhat deceptive prop, as Cantina's guacamole is made with only one avocado. We asked our server to make it as she normally does. Next time, we'd know to request less lime and red onion.

Those who opt not to order starters shouldn't have to wait long for their food. The kitchen was quick to produce, even on busy evenings.

Entrees on the dinner menu (\$10.29-\$26.99) are divided into specials, seafood, platters and chicken sections. Familiar Mexican items like tacos, enchiladas and flautas are featured and often include intriguing ingredients. The restaurant also serves a variety of steaks and touts its fresh Pescado Del Dia, or fish of the day.

We've had chile rellenos - stuffed peppers - at mainstream Little Rock Mexican restaurants, but not with almonds and raisins in addition to the ground beef and pork mixture that fattened Cantina Laredo's ranchera-sauced Mexico City Chile Relleno (\$13.29) with intrigue. This entree, like most, was served with a nut-sprinkled side of mixed vegetables and standard rice.

The Enchilada Veracruz (\$12.29) of chicken, spinach and Monterey Jack cheese was so decked with cheese, tortilla strips, marinated vegetables and tomatillo sauce that it took us a while to realize there were actually

two enchiladas.

The most impressive and expensive dinner we tried was the Carne Asada y Camarones (\$23.99), a generously seasoned, if slightly chewy, grilled steak with bacon-wrapped shrimp bundles filled with Oaxaca cheese and jalapeno. Anyone not requiring the smoky surf could just have the turf, Carne Asada, for \$18.99.

Diners with simpler tastes might try a skillet of sizzling and fragrant Fajitas (\$14.99-\$16.49), served with choice of beans and rice, guacamole, pico de gallo and sour cream. We liked that the onions and peppers weren't drowned in oil, as is usually the case at other restaurants, but the chicken was quite dry.

For those who can't decide on anything or for those who want everything, there is the Cantina Laredo Platter (\$16.29), a saucy sampler complete with cheese chile relleno, tamale, chicken enchilada and beef fajita taco al carbon. "Everything sort of tasted like everything else," reported the friend who ordered it. "Luckily everything tasted good."

Portions were always copious, leaving plentiful leftovers - well, when they weren't whisked away. As a server cleared dishes during a conversation, she never asked if we wanted her to box up a leftover chicken breast; there were two of them that made up the quite salty, and not too spicy Camarones Escondidos (\$18.99) that also included shrimp, sauteed spinach and chipotle sauce. Unfortunately, the chicken got tossed.

We had no other real service issues, even if we got perhaps too many table visits by one nervous server. Our favorite was Shay, a natural, who was cheerful and efficient.

We couldn't even bear the thought of looking at the dessert tray the first two visits. So we were determined to pace ourselves adequately for the third and selected the Mexican Brownie (\$5.99) that Shay recommended. We didn't know that there could be anything better than a chocolate pecan brownie topped with ice cream. But there is - a chocolate pecan brownie topped with ice cream served on a hot skillet that hisses when a wash of Mexican Brandy Butter is poured on it. Everyone on the shaded patio had to have a look at the aromatic, elaborate dessert.

Lunch is served from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. with prices ranging from \$8.99 for a combination plate to \$15.79 for the Pescado Del Dia. On weekends and after 3 p.m. weekdays, lunch prices go up \$1.

Brunch, with dishes like Huevos Rancheros, Chicken Fajita Omelet and Crab Cakes Benedict, is served from 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Sunday with prices in the \$12.99-\$16.99 range.

Entree prices will include one complimentary mimosa or Bloody Maria (made with tequila) when the restaurant's Sunday license is approved.

Cantina Laredo Address: Midtowne Little Rock shopping center, 207 N. University Ave., Little Rock Hours: 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Sunday-Thursday, 11 a.m.-11 p.m. Friday-Saturday Cuisine: "Gourmet Mexican" Credit cards: AE, D, MC, V Alcoholic beverages: Full bar (Sunday license pending) Reservations: No Wheelchair accessible: Yes Carryout: Yes (501) 280-0407 www.cantinalaredo.com

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