

# Fill up on Mexican fare at Cantina Laredo

Hits outweigh misses at eatery at Town Center



*Cantina Laredo manager Nathan Morgan (left) and general manager Rithea Som with a sampling of entrees, appetizers and drinks on the menu at the Mexican restaurant at St. Johns Town Center.*

**By ERICA BURKS, Special to the Times-Union 02/15/08**

If you are expecting real gut-busting, jalapeno-laden Mexican food at Cantina Laredo, you are in the wrong place. Even the name should clue you in: Cantina Laredo. Can it get any more corporate than that?

But if you are in the market for some relatively good Tex-Mex food in an elaborately styled "cantina," this is your spot. It is located in that little gold mining village the locals like to call "the Town Center," where even on a Wednesday night, the wait is 30 minutes long. We smartly made reservations and enjoyed some seriously good tequila while our table was being prepared.

The place is nicely put together, with a well-lit bar up front, separated from the poor unfortunates waiting for a table by a curving row of black leather booths. On the other side of the bar is one large room with several small offshoots to the left and right, both with booths tucked along the wall. There is also at least one room in the back, suitable for larger parties or to handle overflow from the restaurant. Lots of golden paneling covers the walls, and it is smartly modern, with no rustic red clay tiles in sight.

While the decor is refreshing, we found the food to be hit-and-miss. We started with the Top Shelf Guacamole (\$8.99), which is made tableside with fresh avocados, onions, tomatoes and cilantro. All of the requisite ingredients were in place, but I found the avocado itself nearly tasteless. The fresh chips and warm salsas were very good, though, with the tomatillo salsa being the favorite.

In my mind, the best dish of the night was the Ceviche (\$8.99). One of my companions later e-mailed me and said she had dreamed about it - and she was sober! The white fish was beautifully tender and fresh while the shrimp enjoyed a perfect toss with the lime marinade. I also enjoyed the addition of large slices of avocado.

For dinner, I ordered one of the appetizers, the Tacos Al Pastor (\$8.99). The dish came with three corn tortillas filled with shredded pork. A side serving of cilantro and onions helped finish the tacos, but they were a bit dry. This is street vendor fare, and the pork is often slow roasted, then quickly seared for a crisp finish. My favorite is topped with grilled pineapple and cilantro, so this proved a bit disappointing.

The only other dish that was a letdown was the Camarones (\$17.99), but we all agreed it was exactly what was promised: sauteed shrimp in garlic butter on a bed of rice. It looked nice, but the shrimp were a bit dull and small.

Our entrees took a serious uptick with the Shrimp Poblano Chimichanga (\$14.29). The fried flour tortilla was stuffed with shrimp, poblano peppers, Monterey Jack cheese and topped with a wonderful poblano sauce. In addition, this was a two-hander, and our companion was barely able to finish off the entire dish.

Our server said the Pescado Del Dia (\$24.99) was a marinated sea bass, but we thought in taste and texture it more closely resembled swordfish. It was nicely seared and spiced just perfectly, with a hint of lime and spice.

My hubby picked a winner with his simple Carne Asada (\$17.99) or "grilled steak." The steak was prepared medium rare, juicy and seasoned with a simple touch of salt and pepper. He also enjoyed his Spanish rice and passed off the beans to me. They were delicious as well.

Meanwhile, food wasn't slowing the tequila or the talk, so we moved on to some desserts that were "off the chain." I liked the slight cinnamon flavor of the Mexican Brownie (\$6.99), although the Mexican Brandy Butter that sizzled on the hot skillet was a bit hokey. Better were the Crepes (\$5.99), filled with cajeta, a caramel-like sauce, Kahlua, Grand Marnier, almonds and vanilla ice cream.

All in all, I may not call Cantina Laredo true "gourmet" Mexican food, but it definitely is an improvement on some of the more generic "ground beef and taco shell" places around town. We'll go back, and we will definitely make reservations when we do.

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## **Cantina Laredo**

10282 Bistro Drive (St. Johns Town Center)  
(904) 997-6110

**Type of cuisine:** Mexican.

**Hours of operation:** Lunch, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., Monday-Saturday; Dinner, 3 to 11 p.m., Friday and Saturday, 3 to 10 p.m., Monday-Thursday; Sunday brunch, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

**Credit cards:** Mastercard, Visa, Discover, American Express.

**Bar service:** Full bar.

**Children's menu?** Yes.

**Reservations accepted?** Yes.

**Price:** Moderate to expensive.