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First Bite: Cantina Laredo

Thursday, August 13, 2009 6:00 AM
 By G.A. Benton

From the way it's frequently and fanatically referred to by the thoroughly trained servers at Cantina Laredo, you'd think Topshelfguacamole! was a single breathless word. But to be fair, that avocado appetizer is pretty damn good.

Prepared tableside with appropriately fresh ingredients, it's enticingly chunky and tastes the way guacamole should. Well, it better, because it'll cost you \$9.50. Still, it's a whopping big bowl of deeply satisfying dip that could easily serve three to four adults.

If my tone sounds bumpily up and down, it's on purpose. You see, during a couple of visits to Cantina Laredo, I had food that was sometimes good, sometimes pretty damn good, but always on the expensive side. So let me sum up my mixed feelings about this high-end Mexican chain that just opened in Polaris Fashion Place by answering the question "is it worth the price?" with a resounding "sometimes."

Inside, the voluminous eatery sprawls across three snazzy rooms and it has lots of attractive half-in/half-out patio seating. Embellished with bounteous amounts of blond wood, black booths and beige chairs at white-tableclothed tables, it has the scale and look of various other cushy corporate restaurants in upscale malls all over America.

In other words, it's not so crammed with Mexican kitsch that it'll scare off any unadventurous mallers, and thus with a quick knick-knack makeover, it could in effect instantaneously swap ethnicities.

Laredo's menu is filled with the familiar fajita, enchilada and relleno items diners expect, but often the food's given an interesting twist and a high price. For instance, the carnitas have a very untraditional "chipotle wine sauce" but cost \$20.

The Botanas Platter (\$14) was a good "get to know you" appetizer and turned out to be emblematic of Cantina Laredo. Its more mundane elements (chicken quesadillas, a Velveeta-like molten "Mexican" cheese dip and fried stuffed jalapenos) were especially well-executed and its less common items (aromatic al pastor tacos and excellent skewers with sweet grilled shrimp, tender beef and tangy chimichurri sauce) stood out.


Laredo's servers proudly announce their fish is flown in daily and that the Cantina makes all its sauces from scratch. Well, the two best dishes I tried here confirmed those pronouncements.

While not overtly Mexican in character, my fish of the day special (\$16 at lunch/\$25 at dinner) was a lovely piece of salmon expertly grilled. It had a black peppery crust, succulent medium-rare flesh and came with decent Mexican rice and nicely sauteed veggies (zucchini, carrots, green beans) given an unexpected Asian accent.


The Enchilada De Mole (\$11) featured the best and most complex mole sauce I've tasted in a Columbus restaurant. Fruity (likely from ancho chili), nutty, bittersweet chocolaty and spicy, it coated a long corn-tortilla log stuffed with tender shredded chicken breast meat.

Also worth their price were the delicate, warm, apple-filled crepes (\$6) drizzled with underused cajete (caramel sauce made with goat's milk), Kahlua, Grand Marnier and topped with candied pecans.


My advice: try Cantina Laredo at lunch, when prices are lower.



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