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Vibrant Cantina Laredo makes ideal addition to Gulch

*By Nancy Vienneau
FOR THE TENNESSEAN*

Cantina Laredo, the Gulch's festive newcomer, has a vibrant, welcoming feel that made me wish I had started my visit earlier.

On a balmy Tuesday evening, every table staggered along the outside of this sophisticated Mexican eatery was filled with folks imbibing salt-rimmed margaritas or tall amber glasses of beer and noshing on queso, moles and enchiladas.

Inside, the cantina was teeming with an extended Cinco de Mayo spirit. We could barely see the bar for the crowd taking advantage of the happy hour-priced drinks.

We were welcomed and promptly seated in the calmer main dining room, an expansive but sleek space with understated black, white and earth tones.

With tan leather chairs surrounding tables and walls lined with black leather banquettes, Cantina Laredo's contemporary urban feel befits ICON and the Gulch community.

We couldn't stop munching on crisp, paper-thin corn chips, made on site, served with two salsas: one, a fairly typical, tame, tomato-cilantro-jalapeno salsa; the other, also tomato-based, was served slightly warmed and had an addictive smoky chipotle fire.

The menu offers a myriad dining options: a wide selection of appetizers; high-end specialties; more moderately priced (\$10.29-\$16.99) plates of enchiladas, tacos and rellenos; and salads, all with chicken (\$10.49-\$11.99), substantial enough to make a meal.

Guacamole wows

On each table is a small bowl containing an avocado and a lime: enticement for the Top Shelf Guacamole. Having consumed my share of vacuum-packed versions, I relish the simple pleasure of fresh tableside preparation. Here, each server is schooled in the art of the guac.

"He's our best maker," remarked a passing waiter, as our man ground salt and garlic and deftly scooped and chopped avocado. After folding in the remaining ingredients, he finished with a flourish of lime along the rim of the faux molcajete serving dish.

"These jalapenos have all been carefully seeded, so it won't be too hot," he said.

Heat can vary from pepper to pepper — our guacamole was delicious, mild. No matter — a drizzle of that smoky-hot salsa gave it just the right zip.

Pass on the tortilla soup. It's regrettable because visually it appealed. Prepared, in part, tableside, our waiter presented a bowl filled with skinny tortilla strips, moist shredded chicken and a slice of ripe avocado, over which he poured the steaming broth. It had peppery heat but was otherwise vapid.

Our entrees did not disappoint. I ordered the fresh catch of the day: halibut wrapped and grilled in banana leaf (\$25.49). It was expertly cooked — the tender planks of moist fish barely required its roasted red pepper sauce.

The house specialty, the Camaron Poblano Asada (\$21.49), was an ambitious creation: sautéed shrimp, mushrooms and onions stuffed with jack cheese inside a poblano pepper, wrapped with seasoned skirt steak and roasted, dressed with chimichurri sauce.

There's a lot going on there, but the poblano wasn't overwrought with cheese, the shrimp had bite and the asada steak held deep flavors.

Both entrees came plated with Spanish rice — light, tomatoey, with a hint of cumin, and a bountiful sauté of crunchy green beans, carrots and zucchini, dusted with sliced almonds.

Save room for dessert. Cantina Laredo offers five postres, and the pecan-studded Mexican brownie served with a celebratory birthday spray of sparklers at a nearby table caught our eye. But we opted for the signature apple-filled crepes (\$5.99). I confess a weakness for anything topped with cajeta (caramel sauce). I had hoped for more apple and less pie filling and was surprised by the lack of cinnamon. But the scoops of slightly melted vanilla ice cream were rich and cooling; the cajeta, infused with a pleasant shock of tequila, satisfied my caramel cravings.

Overall, Cantina Laredo offers comfortable, somewhat upscale dining geared for broad appeal.

It's not ideal for an intimate dinner, but it's a great place for fun group gatherings.

Additional Facts

CANTINA LAREDO

Address: The Gulch, 592 12th Ave. S., ICON ground floor, Nashville TN 37203; 615-259-9282; www.cantinalaredo.com

Hours: lunch: 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Monday-Saturday. Dinner: 5–10 p.m. Monday-Thursday; 5-11 p.m.

Friday-Saturday. Sunday brunch: 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Cantina Happy Hour: 4-7 p.m. Monday-Friday

Payment: Major credit cards accepted

Reservations: Accepted

Alcohol: Full bar, emphasis on specialty tequilas/margaritas/ mojitos, Mexican beers

Food: Gourmet Mexican

Cost: Dinner specialties, \$11.49-\$26.99; Mexican plates, \$10.29-\$16.99; lunch, \$8.99-\$15.79; brunch plates, 12.99-\$16.99

Parking: Valet, on street, Icon garage, Gulch parking lot

Kids menu: Yes
