

The Gulch's newest hot spot, Cantina Laredo, is to Mexican as P.F. Chang's is to Chinese

By Carrington Fox

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Details:

Cantina Laredo
592 12th Ave. S.,
259-9282
Top Shelf
Guacamole \$9.49
Tacos al Carbon
\$17.29
Cabo Margarita
\$12.50
Camarones
Escondidos \$18.99
Ceviche \$8.99

In 2003, a team of consultants and researchers published *Trading Up: The New American Luxury*, a study of the psychology that leads people to splurge on high-end brand-name items. The book draws on examples of people spending disproportionate amounts of their income on luxury products such as Viking stoves, Callaway golf clubs and boutique vodkas.

In 2002, at just about the same time authors Michael J. Silverstein and Neil Fiske were penning their sociological study, the two-store Texas-based Cantina Laredo began an expansion campaign that reads like a missing chapter of *Trading Up*. Since that time, Cantina has expanded to more than 25 stores in 10 states, catering to a culture of diners happy to pay \$13 for a quesadilla and \$12.50 for a Cabo Wabo margarita served in an architecturally arresting showplace.

The most recent Cantina Laredo to veneer a lofty room with sleek blond wood arrived in the Gulch this spring, banking that the community of New Urban Dwellers was ready to trade up from standard-issue splat-Mex to guacamole made tableside and margaritas poured with Patrón.

Trading Up was a best seller, and Cantina Laredo is too. Good luck getting a reservation on a weekend night. When we called early on a Saturday afternoon, we were told there were no reservations left and to expect a two-hour wait for walk-ins at 7 p.m.

Our dogged foursome prepared to sidle up to the graceful curved bar and work our way through some margaritas to pass the time. But at the last minute, we called ahead to put our name on the list. (Apparently this is different from making a reservation.) When we arrived 30 minutes later, we were escorted immediately to our table in a warmly lit room with oversize abstract canvases.

A centerpiece of avocados and limes in a stainless steel bowl begged the question, "What are we supposed to do with this?" The answer: nothing. The avo and lime are just for show, but they are an irresistible temptation to order the so-called Top Shelf guacamole, which is made at the table.

In our experience, the tableside guacamole was superb—loaded with buttery hunks of vibrant-green avocado and laced with a zesty hint of citrus and flecks of fresh cilantro. It also provided our guac-

maker an unusual opportunity to linger by the table and talk up the menu. On one visit, virtually every employee who came into contact with us—whether it was to mash avocados, pour water or deliver menus—tried to tempt us with the featured salmon. While slightly irritating, the ubiquitous up-sell demonstrated a consistency in staff training that boded well for the service on our three dining experiences. Cantina Laredo is a well-oiled machine offering excellent customer service—and exacting a premium for it.

On our inaugural lunch trip, we double-checked to see if we had the daytime menu, because we couldn't believe the dining room was so full with diners ready to pay \$12.50 for three brisket soft tacos or \$15 for shrimp flautas.

While there were a few lunchtime combinations with rice and beans (two enchiladas or an enchilada and a taco) available for \$9, we ventured into the \$14 botanas platter appetizer (tacos al pastor, chicken fajita, quesadilla, chili con queso and jalapeno poppers). A large plate for sharing, topped with dramatic skewers of tender beef and large grilled shrimp, the greatest-hits assortment of Mexican-style favorites recalled a pu-pu platter from a Chinese restaurant. That comparison elicited the obvious (and apt) characterization of Cantina Laredo as the P. F. Chang's of Mexican food.

Not that there's anything wrong with that. There's a lot to like about P.F. Chang's. But Cantina Laredo is not going to change the way you think of Mexican food, except maybe how much you think it costs. With that in mind, sit back and enjoy the fresh and abundant ride of familiar south-of-the-border cuisine.

A meal at Cantina Laredo opens with two bowls of salsa—a warm version made with tomatillo and corn, and a cold tomato-based recipe—and bottomless warm chips whose texture recalls a papadum. Beware the salsas' sneaky pepper seeds, which produce a stealthy burn, especially when chewed. The refreshingly aggressive level of heat left us calling for a cooling bowl of tableside guac—stat!—while providing a good excuse to try the margaritas. The fresh citrus balanced well with booze and sweetness, but our table found them a little light on the alcohol—and in the case of the ice-choked rocks version, a little light on the margarita altogether.

The ceviche appetizer mixed generous hunks of shrimp, scallop and fish with capers, green olives, tomatoes, red pepper and pink onion. The colorful medley made a good visual impression, but the strong flavors of olives and capers overshadowed the sweet seafood and let only the slightest hint of lime break through.

Camaron poblano asada—grilled steak wrapped around poblano pepper with sautéed shrimp, mushrooms, onions and Monterey Jack cheese—resembled a small steel-belted radial. The loose roulade of thin steak was cooked to pink as we asked on the inside, but the outer part of the pinwheel was a fairly thorough gray. The thin steak was very juicy and flavorful, and the shrimp were tender. The entrée was plated with a medley of sautéed green beans, zucchini and red potatoes, with a side of rice and almonds. While there was a lot going on in the meal—and the parts didn't necessarily tie together naturally—all the ingredients were fresh and of high quality, and we ate them all.

Soft tacos—available with chicken, beef and chorizo con huevos, with choice of corn or flour tortillas—were standard-issue, served with rice, guacamole, lettuce and a bowl of black beans cooked to a soft purple-gray. Chorizo stood out among the trio for its spongy curds of egg and sausage with a low smokey whisper of red pepper. We were surprised to find the tacos sprinkled with yellow shredded cheese but devoid of fresh cilantro. At \$11.99 for a trio or \$10.29 for two, the soft tacos offer a safe haven of a price point at dinner.

Like a Mexican flag, the Durango plate arrived striped with a chile relleno with chunky tomato sauce, a spinach-mushroom enchilada covered in Monterey Jack cheese and poblano sour cream, and a chicken enchilada bathed in mole and sprinkled with sesame seeds. The velvety mole leaned more toward

chocolate and fruit tones than toward peppers, a sweet profile that found favor among our table.

Shrimp figures prominently across the menu, and the seafood was generous and gently cooked in our experience. Among the best uses of shrimp was the camarones escondidas (hidden shrimp), in which the sweet shellfish is embedded in a tender grilled chicken breast and topped with a rich, satiny chipotle-wine sauce, whose texture and deep orange color drew comparison to Indian curry. More than any other item, this signature dish delivered something intriguing and unexpected, beyond a combination of high-quality ingredients in otherwise predictable Mexican-inspired recipes.

Surprisingly enough, the dish that will most likely draw us back to Cantina Laredo is an unassuming chicken chimichurri salad. Available at both lunch and dinner, this Cobb cousin filled a large bowl—whose off-center bottom recalled a chair from George Jetson's house—with mixed lettuces, thin ruffles of bacon, carrot coins, mushrooms and tomato wedges, all tossed with a light citrus-herb dressing and salty crumbles of cotija cheese.

Another reason we'll find an excuse to return is the shameless dessert roster. Skip the signature apple-and-caramel crêpes and go straight for the brownie and apple pie. Both desserts exploit a dangerously hot platter to create the same drama as a sizzling skillet of fajitas. In tableside presentations, the brownie and pie—huge portions—are plated on the sizzling dish. The brownie gets doused with brandy butter and topped with ice cream. The apple pie gets drizzles of brandy butter and caramel and a scoop of ice cream. (A hint: choose cinnamon instead of vanilla.) Both confections sizzle and bubble angrily on the iron; the eating is an exercise in timing, in which you must balance the melting of the ice cream and the cooling of the sauces. Dive in too quickly, and you will singe the roof of your mouth with molten caramel. Wait too long, and you'll have a creamy puddle.

It's a balance that could take practice. But at \$6 a pop, the desserts are affordable luxuries that don't require much trading up.

Cantina Laredo opens at 11 a.m. and serves lunch and dinner daily with Sunday brunch available.

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