

Dinner Date: Cantina Laredo takes Mexican food to another level

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Rarely do you find a restaurant where the experience is as exciting as the food, but Cantina Laredo gets the combination just right.

The minute my sister, Krystal Pea, and I stepped into the restaurant, we felt like we were whisked away into another world.

Everything from the dim lighting and cool upbeat Latin music to the modern style layout and sleek black leather seats made me feel like I was in a scene from "Sex and the City," dining in some fancy spot where everything and everybody looks ultra sophisticated and cool.

The atmosphere alone made the hourlong wait seem practically worth it.

We floated to our seats where we were immediately greeted by a friendly server who patiently explained the drink specials and menu items.

Cantina Laredo is self-described as an upscale gourmet Mexican restaurant, so the menu items were slightly different from your average Mexican restaurant menu, with names like the Enchiladas Veracruz or the Puerta Vallarta.

I wanted to get a little taste of everything, so I started with their popular appetizer, the Botanas Platter, which includes Tacos al Pastor, chicken fajita quesadillas, chili con queso, stuffed jalapenos and beef, shrimp and vegetable skewers.

For my entrée, I ordered the Shrimp Poblano Chimichanga and Krystal ordered the Camarones Escondidos, another popular item, the waitress said.

As soon as we got the appetizer, Krystal and I dug in and I was immediately in heaven when I tasted the stuffed jalapenos. They were made with this perfectly seasoned, melt-in-your-mouth breading on the outside and a spicy, tasty mélange of chicken and other ingredients on the inside.

I don't know if it was just the hunger or what, but it was so good I didn't want that taste to end.

Of course, you can't go wrong with quesadillas or tacos, especially in this case. "These quesadillas are to die for!" Krystal said.

We were still munching on the appetizer plate when our friendly server arrived with our meals. Each dish included a side of seasoned rice and another side of mixed green beans, sautéed onions, new potatoes and almonds.

My chimichanga was stuffed with shrimp, poblano pepper, cheese and topped with poblano sauce. Poblano, the server explained, was a special kind of pepper that's soft and not too spicy, but spicy enough to give a kick.

One bite of that chimichanga just about knocked me out. I mean, the crust was not too flaky and not too chewy, but just right; the shrimp were juicy and fresh and the pepper gave it just the right punch. I was only halfway through when I asked for a to-go box because I was just outdone.

My sister's dish, the Camarones Escondidos, was a grilled chicken breast stuffed with shrimp, topped with sautéed spinach, mushrooms and a signature chipotle-wine sauce. After one bite each, neither one of us were really feeling the sauce, though.

Thankfully, our server wasn't impatient or anything. She kept smiling and simply offered my sister a chance to pick something else on the menu and this time Krystal chose right with the Shrimp Flautas. The dish included shrimp, Monterrey jack cheese and fresh jalapenos rolled up in crispy fried tortillas.

She took one bite and was rolling her eyes in pleasure. "Ooh, this is so good!" she said.

ON THE MENU

Other dishes available at Cantina Laredo include:

Appetizers: Botanas Platter, \$10.99; ceviche, \$7.99; Quesadillas Al Carbon, \$11.99.

Lunch: brisket tacos, \$10.49; Camaron Poblano Asada, \$18.29.

Dinner: Shrimp Poblano Chimichanga, \$12.49; Camarones Escondidos, \$16.99.

Dessert: Big Chocolate Cake, \$5.99; Mexican brownie, \$4.49; Mexican apple pie, \$4.49.

Drinks: Casa Rita (house margarita), \$7.99; Tequila Flight, \$20.

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Two to-go boxes later, we were ready for dessert. The seemingly psychic server was right there, ready to show us the dessert menu. However, instead of handing us paper menus, she whipped out this cool faux dessert tray with plastic replicas of their dessert choices.

We were just about to go with the Mexican apple pie when several different customers passing by strongly recommended the Mexican Brownie. "You HAVE to try it!" one customer exclaimed.

After a hearty recommendation like that, we decided to switch to the brownie and, boy, what a choice it was.

We watched in sheer awe as the server placed the large piece of brownie covered in chocolate sauce onto a hot plate. She placed two scoops of vanilla ice cream on top of the brownie and then drizzled it with this sweet smelling brandy butter sauce that literally sizzled on the plate.

By then, we were practically drooling. Then came the taste test.

I'm seriously not exaggerating when I say there are no words for this dish.

It tasted like a mix between a cake and a brownie, with these chocolate chunks and sweet flavors mixed in.

We took a couple of bites each and were practically laid out.

Needless to say, our visit to Cantina Laredo was more than satisfying. It was a much-needed retreat into dining bliss -- one that I definitely plan to make again.

Dinner Date is a weekly restaurant review. The Times pays for all meals. Negative reviews are based on at least two visits.

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