

SALSA'S MEXICAN RESTAURANT

BY RICH BELMONT

Salsa's opened at the corner of 11th and Main Streets in Dubuque on February 27, 2004. If you haven't been there before you might think it's just another typical Mexican chain eatery. But no, this one is different. It is an independent, family owned, restaurant serving authentic made- from- scratch Mexican food. It's different because the cuisine is especially prepared to appeal to the expectations of American diners.

Salsa's is in a building over 100 years old. It was previously a bar called the Shangri-La affectionately known as "Old Shang" by its patrons. After the building was renovated by Gronen Restoration John Gronen gave Salsa's owners the opportunity to move in.



Salsa's was opened by Emiliano and Maria Ramirez. Emiliano is from Escuintla, a city with a current population of approximately 103,000 in south central Guatemala. His family moved to Los Angeles when he was six.

Emiliano relocated to Dubuque 15 years ago in order to be near his brother Pablo Ramirez who was studying at the University of Dubuque. Pablo was the football kicker while at UD. After graduating from the Aviation Management Program a twist of fate landed him in the City of Dubuque Police Department where over the last 21 years he has climbed through the ranks and is now a Lieutenant.

Emiliano started as a waiter at La Mesa (now Los Aztecas) on Dodge Street. When La Mesa's owner went to open more restaurants in Wisconsin he took Emiliano with him. Soon thereafter Emiliano was cooking at Cancun Mexican Grill in Eau Claire, WI. When he came back to Dubuque he opened his own restaurant called Salsa's which means sauce in Spanish. He chose the name because his restaurant uses many different sauces and he makes all of them himself. There is Mild Sauce for tortilla chips; Salsa Ranchera for eggs; De Burro Sauce for burritos; Enchilada Sauce; Tomatillo Sauce; Mole; Chipotle Sauce made from dried jalapeño peppers; Cheese Sauce; Adobo, a mild sauce made from dried peppers, garlic and vinegar for pork and chicken; and of course the hot sauce—Salsa Picante.



Salsa's was open for about 28 months when it closed in June, 2006 for an 8 month remodeling project. Four inches of concrete was poured over the dirt floor in the basement. A new maple wood floor was installed and a 90 year old mahogany bar was brought in. There is a bit of a story that goes with the bar: patrons used to snuff out their cigarettes on it and the burn marks are still visible.

Emiliano's restaurant is a family business. He and his wife Maria are the owners. But he also considers his long-time employees, Chef Jose Rodriguez, Christian Hernandez, Fidadelfio Muxtay, and Nely Ribas members of his family.

Salsa's menu is the same for lunch and dinner. There are many lunch specials available every day, except Sunday, from 11 am to 2:30 pm. Happy Hour is from 4 pm to 6 pm when there are drink specials. You can decide for yourself what these specials are (within limits!).



Fajitas are a delicious specialty. Beef Fajitas are beef strips cut from Ball Tip Steak which is also known as sirloin or sandwich steak. The Chicken Fajitas are strips of center cut chicken breast. The term "center cut" means the thinner tips of the breasts have been removed so they don't overcook and become dry.

The Salsa's Fajita is an excellent choice. This is a combination of steak, chicken, shrimp and chorizo sausage. It is served with sautéed onions, bell peppers, rice, beans, guacamole, lettuce, pico de gallo, sour cream and corn or flour tortillas. A cheese quesadilla is included just for fun.



The Chimichanga is very popular here. Your choice of steak or chicken is wrapped in a tortilla with bell peppers, onions and spices. Then it is fried and topped with a cheese sauce. The sauce adds a tasty flavor: Mexican cheese is blended with warm milk and jalapeños.



The Burrito Grande is impressive. Two twelve inch flour tortillas are stuffed with your choice of beef or chicken, then fried, then topped with a combination of Tomatillo and Enchilada sauce. This is 2.5 pounds of good eating!

The Chilaquiles Mexicanos (Tchee-lah-KEE-lehs May-e-CAN-os) is an interesting and unusual dish not typically found on Mexican menus in this country. Fried tortilla chips are topped with chicken, red sauce and melted cheese. The sauce is mild but in Mexico this would have a very hot salsa picante because Chilaquiles is believed to be a cure for hangovers!

The Burrito Salsa is also a good dinner selection. This is different from the other burritos because ground beef is used instead of steak strips and shredded chicken instead of sliced is used to stuff the flour tortilla.



There are many ways to enjoy Pollo (chicken) at Salsa's. Pollo en Adobo is chicken marinated in Adobo Sauce. Chicken Popeye is a grilled chicken breast topped with spinach, mushrooms, onions and cream cheese. And Pollo a la Dubuque is a marinated breast topped with Cheese Sauce. Both the Popeye and Dubuque entrées contain a whole pound of chicken.

Seafood specialties are always in great demand. The Tacos de Pescado (Fish Tacos) is two white fish fillets marinated in a chile lime juice. The Seafood Enchiladas are made with crabmeat and shrimp and topped with a spinach sauce.

Salsa's also gives you many ways to feast on Camarones (cam-ar-own-ees) (Shrimp). These include:



Coctel de Camarones (Shrimp Cocktail)—in a dish with avocados, onions, tomatoes and peppers.

Camarones al Mojo de Ajo (al Moho Day Eyeyo)—literally garlic-soaked shrimp. The Mexican version of Scampi.

Camarones al Chipotle (Chee-poa-t-lay)—grilled shrimp in a chipotle sauce.

Camarones Rancheros (Ran-chair-ohz)—grilled shrimp smothered in sauce.

Camarones a la Diabla (Dee-ab-la)—shrimp sautéed in a red hot sauce and my favorite! Hint: anytime you see El Diablo or La Diabla on a menu it refers to the Devil and means you can expect the dish to be spicy hot.



Salsa's has a reputation as the place to go for outstanding Margaritas. Emiliano is an expert in mixing Margaritas and he uses his own proprietary recipe. You all know what a Margarita is, right? Well, just in case you forgot it is a cocktail consisting of tequila, triple sec and lime or lemon juice usually served with kosher or sea salt on the rim of the glass. The

International Bartenders Association specifies an official ratio of 7 parts tequila, 4 parts triple sec and 3 parts lime juice. According to Mexican law all tequilas must be made with over 50 percent juice of the blue agave plant. The most expensive tequilas are 100% agave or pure blue agave. Triple sec is an orange flavored liqueur made from the dried peels of bitter and sweet oranges. You can request this concoction served straight up (no ice), on the rocks (ice) or blended with ice (frozen). Today the Margarita is the most common tequila-based cocktail.

Nobody knows for sure where and when the Margarita was invented. The first time it appeared in print was when it was the drink of the month in the December 1953 issue of Esquire Magazine. It became popular after Jimmy Buffett recorded Margaritaville in 1976. It really took off after he opened his first Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville Restaurant in Key West in 1985 where it was, and still is, the signature drink. Fun Fact: there are now over 30 Margaritaville Restaurants and the closest one is at Navy Pier in Chicago.

Most people would agree: the more expensive the tequila the more flavorful the Margarita. This is why Salsa's stocks 17 of them. They include Don Julio, Patrón, Jose Cuervo, El Jimador, Corralejo, Herradura, Cazadores, 1800 Silver, 1800 Gold, Tres Generaciones and El Tesoro de Don Felipe.

I am still experimenting to see which ones I like the best so every time I order Margaritas I ask for different tequilas and I check them off my list. If you are going to play this game you should know some of the terms used on tequila labels:

Blanco (white) or Plata (silver) - are young tequilas and are completely clear liquid.

Ora (gold)—these are the same as clear tequilas only they have artificial coloring added. There is no taste difference between Blanco and Ora.

Reposado (rested)—these are aged between two months and one year in oak or some other wooden barrels.

Añejo (aged)—tequila aged in oak for a minimum of one year and a maximum of three. Aging mellows the harshness of the alcohol and adds more complex flavors.

The next time you visit Salsa's Mexican Restaurant notice the Frozen Margarita Machine on the bar. It's an expensive piece of equipment and it's really necessary if you expect to have a magnificent frozen margarita. With this machine Salsa's is able to make fresh margaritas for every order and each one is smooth and consistent and never watered down. Fun Fact: the first Frozen Margarita Machine was made from a modified soft-serve ice cream dispenser and is now on display at the Smithsonian Institution. If you like your Margarita frozen you have a choice of lime, strawberry, raspberry, peach or mango.

SALSA'S MEXICAN RESTAURANT

1091 Main Street, Dubuque, IA 52001

563-588-2880 • SalsasMexicanRestaurantDQU.com

Hours: Sun–Thu: 11 AM–9 PM; Fri–Sat: 11 AM–10 PM

Dining Style: Come as you are

Noise Level: Conversational

Recommendations: Taquitos Mexicanos, Speedy Gonzales, Chicken Popeye, Carne Asada, Salsa's Fajita, Burrito Grande, Chicken Chimichanga, Camarones al Mojo de Ajo, Camarones a La Diabla, Tacos de Pescado

Liquor Service: Full Bar, Margaritas, Daiquiris

Prices: Lunch: \$5.99–\$8.99; Dinner: \$7.99–\$14.99

Pay Options: Cash, Debit, All Credit Cards except AMEX, No Checks

Accessibility: Front Door and Restrooms

Kids Policy: Menu–Yes, High Chair–Yes, Booster–Yes

Reservations: Yes • **Catering:** Yes, Both on and off-premises • **Take Out:** Yes • **Delivery:** No

Parking: On Main Street and 11th Street