



MARGARITA ON THE ROCKS



ENCHILADAS MEXICANAS

Las Margarritas

By Danny Fairchild

First, let me get this out of the way: If you're avoiding going to Las Margarritas because you figure it's going to be just like Salsa's (the previous Mexican restaurant at this same location), you're wrong to do so. And I get it. It's in the same location as Salsa's. The owner of Las Margarritas worked at Salsa's for years and years. But rest assured: Las Margarritas is not Salsa's. Las Margarritas isn't even Las Margaritas (one "r"), which hasn't been in Dubuque in over a decade. Las Margarritas is Las Margarritas. And Las Margarritas is distinctly delicious. Okay, then. Moving on.

Sometimes, all it takes to make the world better is to ask the questions nagging at the back of everyone's mind that no one else thinks to ask. Or they lack the courage to ask. Or they just assume that this is as good as it gets and just accept it. Despotism has fallen... world-changing discoveries have been revealed... hairstyles better suited to your coiffure and face have been discovered... just by starting a sentence with the word, "Why..."

And so, Las Margarritas, the new Mexican restaurant in Downtown Dubuque, has the huevos to ask the hard question:

Why don't more Mexican restaurants season their chicken better?

Don't act like you don't know what I'm talking about. You've taken countless bites of enchiladas et. al. where the sauces are nice and flavorful and complement the chicken well enough... but the chicken itself is kind of dry and flavorless. Even the better Mexican restaurants are guilty of this. Well... maybe "guilty" isn't the right word. I can't fault restaurants for just letting chicken be chicken. It's chicken, after all. In America, we eat more chicken than any other meat, and why not? In my opinion (that I just formed so don't challenge me on it if you actually know stuff) the old chestnut "everything tastes like chicken" is true because chicken can carry just about every flavor. One of my favorite cooking books is *The Flavor Bible* by Andrew Dornenberg and Karen A. Page. Just about any ingredient you can imagine is listed alphabetically with a long entry listing what other ingredients go well with it. Most ingredients get a half to a one full page dedicated to their flavor partners. Even the entry for rice only comes in at about two pages. Yes, rice. And that's counting all the different kinds

of rice, because they're separated out in the book. Chicken, on the other hand, has four full pages dedicated to it. Three, if you take out the full-page picture, but don't do that because chicken deserves a full-page spread. And it's not even separated out into different categories such as white and dark meat. It just says "chicken." Chicken is every flavor's friend, so you can be forgiven for just letting chicken be chicken.

"Sure, that's fair" says Las Margarritas, "But why not let chicken be even better?"

Fair question, right? If chicken's defining feature is that it takes other flavors so dutifully, aren't you letting chicken be chicken by maybe marinating it first or something? Right?

Damn right. And so, when you try Las Margarritas (spelled with the extra "r" so you know it's good), I want you to pay special attention to just how flavorful the chicken itself is. And no, it doesn't detract from the other flavors and salsas. The Mexican flavors you crave are still very present. But I've eaten at dozens of Mexican restaurants, as have you. Never before had any of them heard me say, "Dang, the chicken in that dish tastes amazing." But those were the first words out of my mouth after the first bite at Las Margarritas.

I've been going on and on about the chicken, and I will again when I get into the individual dishes we tried

because it's relevant. But first, let's talk about the reason you REALLY go out for Mexican cuisine: The margaritas.

Las Margarritas doesn't try to get too cute with the recipe of their margaritas. They know what you've come to expect from a margarita, and they deliver it. When you're out drinking margs with friends, you want to be surprised by who Diane has been doing lately. You don't want to be surprised by your margarita. If you want a specialty margarita, you'll order one, right? I didn't get fancy. I just got the smaller size on the rocks. It's everything you want in a margarita with no surprises, EXCEPT... Las Margarritas has some of the cutest stinking margarita glasses EVAR! Look at that cute picture! A stemless margarita glass, yo! How cute is that? And it was a delight to drink from. I, personally, don't buy stemless for my own drinkware. The stem is there so your hand doesn't warm your drink while you hold it. But margaritas are iced as hell. Your hand isn't going to have much impact, stem or no, so why not be cute? And, let's face it, after a couple of margs, you're probably like me: Not picking up your margarita, but leaving the margarita on the table and bringing my mouth to it, instead of the other way around. Like a kid drinking their chocolate milk. A drunk kid.

The food!



LUNCH COMBO: CHICKEN BURRITO, CHICKEN ENCHILADA VERDE, AND BEAN TOSTADA



TRIO FAJITAS

Whenever I encounter a new Mexican restaurant, my eyes start scanning for the word “mole.” No, not the small subterranean mammal. I’m talking “mole” as in “moh-LAY.” I love mole. All variants, or at least the ones I’ve tried. There’s a lot of them. But the ones I like best are the ones that rebut to all your caregivers who have ever said, “No, you can’t have chocolate for dinner!” Because yes, you can. It’s called mole and it’s rich and dark and spiced up nice with some chiles, and yes... there’s chocolate in it. I wouldn’t call it “chocolatey” because there’s not much in the way of sweeteners to make it like a melted candy bar. It’s definitely a savory dish.

Las Margarritas fulfilled my need for mole with their Enchiladas Mexicanas. It’s three chicken enchiladas (remember what I said about their chicken. It applies here.) topped with mole sauce and served with the traditional spread of rice, lettuce, sour cream, and tomatoes. Mole, as you can imagine, can be a pretty heavy dish. Not so with this take on Enchiladas Mexicanas. It’s almost light. Light enough that I got to wet my beak on other dishes at the table without making myself wish death would just come already. And, again, I totally had chocolate for lunch. Screw you, mom and dad.

The Enchiladas Verdes...

Oh! Wait! Before I forget: if you’ve ever wondered what the actual factual

differences between enchiladas and, say, a burrito, here’s what: Flour tortilla=burrito, corn tortilla=enchilada; usually handheld=burrito, always fork-held=enchilada; sauces on the inside=burrito, sauces smothered on the outside=enchilada. You get it.

The Enchiladas Verdes! Yes, we got an enchilada verde in the lunch combo along with a burrito and bean tostada. We did what we felt was right, and it was because this was damn tasty. I like a good salsa verde. Hell, I even like a bad salsa verde. There’s a brightness and freshness that’s different from the brightness and freshness of the salsa roja you’re used to. The difference between verde and roja is obvious. The color. Green vs. red. Surely you remember that much from Spanish class. Salsa roja is made with tomatoes (red), salsa verde is made with tomatillos (green). You probably knew that already, too. With Las Margarritas’ enchiladas verdes, you’re getting corn tortillas stuffed with shredded chicken (yay, chicken!) then topped with salsa verde and served with refried beans, guacamole, lettuce, rice, sour cream, and tomatoes. If Christmas were an enchilada, it would be THIS enchilada.

The Trio Fajitas. Here we’re talking steak, chicken (wut-wuuuuut!), and shrimp grilled with onions and bell peppers and served with all the usual accompaniments. I’m on record as saying that, usually... not always,

but usually, fajitas don’t taste as good as they sound and smell. They taste good, of course. They just don’t taste as good as they sound and smell. Like a concert where the opening band is better than the headliner you came to see. But I gotta say, friends, the fajitas, particularly the trio fajita, at Las Margarritas delivers on the flavor promised by the sizzle and aroma. Yes, that well-seasoned chicken is a major factor in this, but I must give props to the steak as well. With fajitas, you worry that the beef will be cooked to a crisp in order to get that sizzle going all the way to your table. Not at Las Margarritas. It LOOKS like the steak has been cooked to a crisp, but that’s just a deliciously thorough sear on the outside. Inside, each morsel is perfectly cooked. I’m super impressed by their fajitas, you guys.

As for the bathrooms, if you ate at Salsa’s at ANY time in their long history, you know what to expect. Say what you want about Salsa’s, but you have to admit that they took good care of their location. Las Margarritas is keeping this cleanliness alive, and that’s reflected even in the bathroom. Poop and/or pee at ease.

Again, if you’re expecting The Return of Salsa’s, you’re not going to get that with Las Margarritas. If you’re pining for Salsa’s, you’re not going to get that closure. But you’re going to get something that I think you’ll like even better. Eat up. ■



Las Margarritas

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