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A CLEAN, UNTILED PLACE

Chelita's Taqueria keeps it simple, authentic

BY JOHN LOCANTHI

I stepped into a small taqueria along Main Street in downtown Springfield. The unassuming stucco storefront seemed the perfect camouflage for a delicious, authentic Mexican eatery. It was a little place called Chelita's Taqueria.

"What would you like to eat?" asked Tania Cano as I stared at the large menu scrawled upon a chalkboard.

"What would you recommend?"

"The veggie quesadilla. It has mushrooms, peppers, tomatoes, cotija..." I said yes before she finished rambling off the fillings. The ingredients were standard enough, but I was not prepared for what was in store for me.

What arrived at my table was a large, homemade tortilla stuffed with veggies and jack cheese with a heavy dusting of crumbled cotija cheese on top. It looked like a gigantic taco. I've been to many Mexican restaurants and taquerias growing up in Oregon, but never had I ever seen a quesadilla quite like this. Cano described it as just a normal quesadilla with a shrug. I didn't even know how or where to begin my attack.

Chelita's Taqueria has been serving authentic Mexican food since its opening on Aug. 21 last year. Gracie Cano started it up at the behest of her daughters and with a little help from her neighbor, who lets them rent the space. Cano's mission was to bring years of experience in the food business and her family recipes to an area of Springfield yearning for a truly Mexican restaurant.

Chelita's is a true family establishment. Gracie's daughters Tania and Natalie are in the taqueria most of the day, taking orders and serving customers. The food is prepared by their aunt Maria, all from their grandmother's recipes. Chelita is the pet name for Graciela, Gracie's full name. Together these four women, along with volunteers, have worked to spread their exquisite cuisine and friendly atmosphere over the past seven months.

The food itself is rich and homey. The quesadilla was a nice blend of cheese, veggies and mushrooms. Unlike many recent Mexican chains or restaurant that try to incinerate your taste buds or soak them in cream, this dish maintained a delicate balance. The rest of the menu follows a similar philosophy — flavorful, filling and not too spicy (though the homemade red sauce does pack a nice punch). The prices are reasonable and most of the menu is ordered a la carte.

You'll find no tacky tilework in Chelita's. There are no waiters wearing sombreros or ponchos. There is no looped soundtrack of mariachi music blaring throughout the establishment. Chelita's does not condescend to clichés for authenticity. It does not try to shock and awe its customers with outrageously spiced food. It is a small, homey taqueria selling simple comfort food passed down through multiple generations of Canos at work.

"I know what real Mexican food is," said Natalie Cano, Gracie's younger daughter. "And this is it." ■

BEAUTIFUL SYMBIOSIS

The District, Cornucopia collaborate on new Eugene hot spot BY WILLIAM KENNEDY

One of Eugene's hottest nightlife scenes is about to get even hotter — seven nights a week. For a few years now, The District — formerly the Indigo District — has been a highly successful dance club, but only on Thursday through Saturday nights. This has left the building at the corner of 13th and Oak — one of Eugene's finer bits of architecture — woefully underutilized.

In May, Alison Albrecht and the rest of the Cornucopia crew — who recently showed some restaurant Midas touch in opening a second location on 5th Street — hope to make better use of the space with their latest venture, the Maize Lounge. Albrecht has subleased the remaining 4,000 square feet on the 13th and Willamette Alley side of the building, and she has removed the blacked out windows and opened up the space.

The menu will share Cornucopia's focus on organic food with local ingredients but will differ in some significant ways by featuring microbrews, trendy wine on tap, a condiment bar and a French fry menu giving you the option of toppings like hot cheese sauce and gravy. The Maize Lounge plans to be open from 11 am to late night with breakfast served all day, thereby filling a "brunch" void in Eugene. There will be ample parking for both cars and bikes.

Albrecht says she hopes to establish a symbiotic relationship between the Maize Lounge and The District, one helping the other prosper. "It's like two great families coming together," she says. ■

We're cooking up something for everyone!



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