

Tacos El Catrin

Serving traditional Mexican dishes made from scratch

Don't judge a book by its cover. And by that same token, don't overlook a restaurant in a strip mall. To do so would be to miss out on Tacos El Catrin, one of the more exciting developments in dining on the North Coast.

Now, before I explain what Tacos El Catrin is, it might help to explain what it isn't.

Tacos El Catrin is not the safe, staid, homogenized, Americanized Mexican restaurant that's been photocopied across the land. You know the type I mean, offering 20 different versions of the "combo menu"; two tacos and an enchilada, a burrito and a tamale, two tacos and a burrito, and so on to infinity.

Tacos El Catrin isn't that. There is no free chips and bland salsa to fill up on, no "American" section of the menu with burgers and fries, no buzzing neon Corona sign.

Instead, Tacos El Catrin prepares traditional Mexican dishes simply, well and from scratch. The space is filled with natural light. It is clean, boldly colored and brightly decorated. An

open-kitchen fills nearly half the room. The rest is ringed by small tables, a few chairs and bench seating.

Our waitress was helpful, boisterous and rightfully proud of the menu. "Everything is homemade," she said, "the chorizo, the salsa — even the beans don't come from a can."

Now, I would be remiss to say that I did not try the taco or burrito — I had them both. And while I have no qualms with either — and the chicken in the burrito was perfectly cooked, just slightly blackened on the edges — the real joys of Tacos El Catrin are in the paths less traveled.

Our waitress suggested the mole, and my

companion obliged. I haven't always loved the dish, as too often I've found it overly sweet. At Tacos El Catrin, however, the mole sauce was rich, robust and finely balanced. I couldn't keep my hands off it.

The same went for the cheese tamale. It was hot, soft, and not overly mealy, with a perk of poblano pepper in the center. Made with three kinds of cheese, including Mexican panela and cotija, the tamale was a quiet, understated star — a treat for vegetarians and carnivores alike.

Along with daily specials and eggy breakfast dishes like huevos rancheros, there were many more entrées I wanted to try — and will yet — but I was entranced by the *pazole* and *menudo*, which are only available on weekends, as the slow-cooked soups/stews require extended time to prepare and cook.

Now, call me a sucker, but there's something



The Mouth enjoyed a carne asada taco and found the cheese tamale, made with three kinds of cheese, to be an understated star.

The mole sauce was rich, robust and finely balanced in this mole chicken dish.

about such scarcity that gets me going, so I returned Saturday evening. By that point, around 7 p.m., the day's allotment of *menudo* had sold out. Thankfully, there was some *pazole* left.

With a base of hominy (dried corn kernels that, after an alkali process, puff up like a slightly larger chickpea) and slow-cooked pork, *pazole* is an Aztec recipe with great — and wild — ritual significance. (Seriously, Google it.) The broth is spiced with chilies, bay leaves and more, but it delivered mostly the flavor of the pork. At the time of serving ruffage is added, including lettuce, cabbage, onion, radish and avocado. The dish comes too with crisp, hardened corn tortillas, which I opted to crinkle up and sprinkle into the broth.

The resulting bowl split the difference be-



tween soup and stew. Its textures danced blissfully from bite to bite, from the crispness of the lettuce and cabbage to the buttery smooth avocado, to the crunchy tortilla and supple hominy. All the while, the pork was so soft it seemed to multiply, separating each time my spoon stirred the broth.

With dinner I had a blue mint margarita, which combined light and dark tequila, blue curacao and fresh mint with a sugar rim. Like the food — and the restaurant itself — the drink was vividly colored. I enjoyed the zest of the mint, though at \$10 it was over-priced. The food, however, was a great value.

Tacos El Catrin, which opened last September, is helmed by chef Enrique Reyes, who spent the previous nine years in the kitchen of Cannon Beach's Stephanie Inn. And while it seems Reyes' current vision — which he's absolutely executing — is to serve traditional dishes made from scratch, it's not hard to imagine him innovating down the line. Nonetheless, he's off to a tremendous start.

The North Coast, particularly outside of Astoria, needs more restaurants like Tacos El Catrin. It's as inspiring as it is inspired.

mouth OF THE COLUMBIA

COAST WEEKEND'S LOCAL RESTAURANT REVIEW

Story and photos by THE MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA • mouth@coastweekend.com

Tacos El Catrin

Rating: ★★★★★

39 N. U.S. Highway 101

Warrenton, OR 97146

503-861-0369

HOURS: 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday; closed Mondays.

PRICE: \$ — Entrées are all around \$10.

SERVICE: Bright, friendly and engaging.

VEGETARIAN/VEGAN OPTIONS: Pretty good. A number of dishes can include meatless options.

DRINKS: Beer, wine, margaritas and soft drinks.

KEY TO RATINGS

- ★ poor
- ★★ below average
- ★★★ good & worth returning
- ★★★★ excellent
- ★★★★★ outstanding, the best in the Columbia-Pacific region

The blue mint margarita combines light and dark tequila, blue curacao and fresh mint with a sugar rim.

