

EL MARIACHI LOCO

Gearhart restaurant boasts a huge menu —
that serves up the short end of the stick

You could count all the restaurants in Gearhart on your fingers and still have a few to spare. That two of the eateries in this small pool serve Mexican food, have similar names, and can be seen from the other's parking lot is not only odd, but confusing. So bear with me...

El Mariachi was originally on the east side of U.S. Highway 101. That eatery is now known as El Trio Loco, re-christened after a change in ownership. The new El Mariachi Loco resides on the west corner of Highway 101 and Pacific Way. The moves, I'm told, have to do with personal relationships dissolving alongside business partnerships. (It's also worth noting that two smaller El Mariachi Loco satellites in Cannon Beach and Manzanita have been folded up in the re-organization.) But I'm less interested in owner's personal lives than what they put on the table. And to that end I must say: El Mariachi Loco left me rather flat.

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I can also say that the menu — which a server told me was revamped for the new location — is a monstrosity. Leaving out drinks, appetizers, desserts and side dishes, I counted over 70 different entrées. That's too many. Besides diluting a chef's attention, such inundation is cumbersome for customers and needlessly so, as many of the dishes feature similar flavors from dovetailing ingredients. (I find myself wondering: Does El Maria-

chi Loco have more ingredients in the kitchen or items on the menu?)

Along with our complimentary chips and watered-down salsa — almost wholly without chunks of tomato or onion — my companion and I began with drinks. She had the Margarita (\$6.95) and I the Tijuana Sunrise (\$6.95). Made by the server rather than a dedicated bartender, the cocktails were sugary and basic. The Sunrise, with tequila and orange juice, was reminiscent of a Creamsicle. The margarita, with off-the-shelf mix, was syrupy and overly sweet.

Dinner arrived promptly and was something to see. My Trio Loco (\$21.95) came on a plate the size of a platter, seemingly containing a little bit of everything (chicken, steak and shrimp). My companion's fajitas arrived on a skillet, sizzling and bellowing plumes of hot steam. Unfortunately, El Mariachi Loco's presentation eclipsed its preparation.

The chicken was particularly disappointing, as the breast was sliced laterally, making two separate, paper-thin steaks that should've been one. The cut was dumbfoundingly thin, about a quarter inch, and it left the meat tough and dry. One can only imagine El Mariachi's motive for cutting is either to create a visual illusion or to stretch skimpy product. Either way, I felt like I was getting the short — or, should I say, the "thin" — end of the stick.

The beef was sliced similarly, though it can at least be said that carne asada is often prepared similarly. Still, it was dry, under-spiced and underwhelming. The surf portion that rounded out the dish — shrimp, with mushrooms, onions and garlic — far surpassed the turf. Served in a boat, the onion-heavy melange was sautéed in butter. The onions were lightly caramelized, and the diced garlic turned crispy. The shrimp was the highlight for my companion as well, who was as puzzled over the fajitas as I was the thin chicken breast.

In short, the Chicken Fajitas (\$13.95) were swimming in what tasted an awful lot like cheap barbecue sauce. Though there was no mention of any sauce on the menu, the chicken, onions and peppers were



The Mouth found the Trio Loco's chicken to be thin and dry, the beef to be underwhelming, and the buttery shrimp and mushrooms to be the highlight of the dish.

A hard-shell taco at El Mariachi Loco resembled fast food, while chicken enchiladas were tastier. Spanish rice made for a bland side, and the black beans were soupy.



drowning in it. The haphazard pour had spilled all over the sides of the skillet and onto its outer wooden rim. Nothing about the sauce was value added. Rather, it was an unnecessary helping of corn syrup. Simply fried and left to their own devices, the chicken and veggies would've been better. As my companion said, "It's frustrating when you think you're ordering one thing and another shows up." I agreed, and we left a little disappointed.

I returned a week later to try again, and the server remembered me. (It should be noted that the service at El Mariachi Loco was sweet and unobtrusive.) I flipped through the menu and found something, a simple combo of enchiladas and a taco, though I never felt great about my decision. (How can you be sure, when there's so much that's so similar?)

Again, the salsa was watery and thin, and the food emerged promptly. I was saddened to find that the taco in my combination came in a hard corn shell, rather than like the street-style, soft-corn tortilla tacos on the voluminous menu. The shredded beef needed salt, and together — with lettuce, tomato and a bit of shredded cheese — it resembled fast food.

The enchiladas were better. The chicken was juicy, and the corn tortillas were soft, mushy. They were topped with melted cheese and an inconsequential drizzle of lightly sweet, red enchilada sauce.

The combo meal — like the other entrées before it — came with beans and Spanish rice. The rice's seasoning was almost nonexistent, the re-fried beans traditionally lardy. On the second visit I opted for black beans, and although a bit too much of the liquid from the pot made it to my plate, they left me leaner than their refried cousins.

Still, I once again walked out of El Mariachi Loco without a sense of contentedness, much less jubilation. This time it was because, after tip, I felt like I'd paid almost twice as much as I should have for a meal that was rather bland. It seemed I'd again gotten the short end of the stick.

mouth OF THE COLUMBIA

COAST WEEKEND'S LOCAL RESTAURANT REVIEW

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

El Mariachi Loco

Rating: ★ ★

3350 U.S. Highway 101 N., Gearhart
503-739-7091

HOURS: 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday to Sunday.

PRICE: \$\$ — Entrées hover between \$11 and \$20

SERVICE: Sweet, smiling, mild and unobtrusive

VEGETARIAN / VEGAN OPTIONS: A few vegetarian choices, a few more potentially with substitutions

DRINKS: Soda, coffee, beer, wine and cocktails

KEY TO RATINGS

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