

# THE RIO CAFE

**Astoria Mexican restaurant turns out quick lunches and great flavors**

**T**he Rio Cafe is an Astorian institution. You know it, and you love it. That much is clear upon walking in the door: Proudly displayed are a whopping seven Coast Weekend Readers' Choice Awards for best Latin Food, including a five-year sweep from 2009 through 2013. Last year the Rio placed second, with top honors being taken by La Cabana de Raya. And while I don't believe slipping one spot deserves overt inspection, it's always worth checking in on restaurants as time passes.

Now, for those of you (like me) who might need a little history: The Rio Cafe is 23 years young. Owner Julie Hemeon began there as a waitress and purchased the business 11 years ago. She was the hostess and lone server one afternoon when I went for lunch. Her experience shows. Her menu expertise was paramount and her care preternatural. She recommended three dishes, the Pescado Rojo (aka Pacific Snapper in spicy red sauce), her personal favorite, as well as the Burrito de Puerto Verde and the Chicken Burrito Chipotle. I tried the first two.

Hemeon offered chips and salsa on the house. She included the salsa fresca, which included a little non-traditional sprinkling of cumin, as well as red chili and habanero. The red chili was smoky and exceedingly dark. I embraced the habanero. In a garlicky, tomato base it wasn't burning up. It's designed not for novelty, but actually eating.

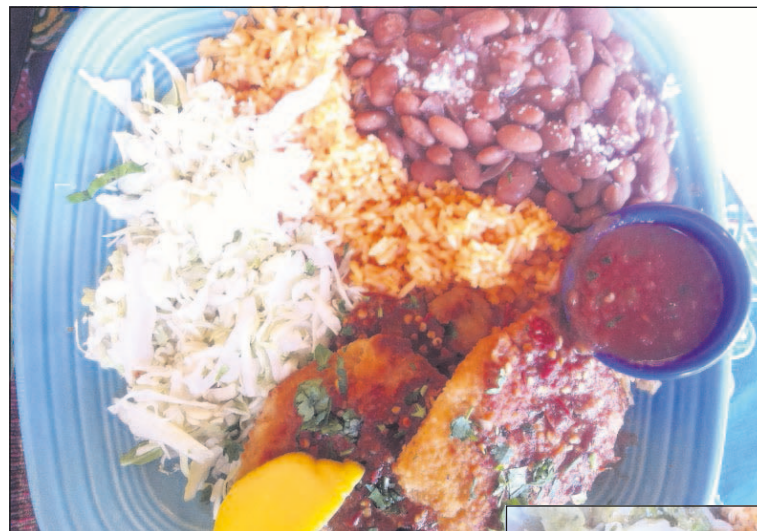
I hardly had time to taste the trio of salsas before the fish arrived. But that timeliness deserves underscoring: Quick turnaround is integral to the Rio's model — the restaurant does a lot of day-time lunches. So much so, in fact, that the place just added a salad bar.

Anyway, the Pescado Rojo (\$11.95). It came on a hot plate atop a colorful pot holder, with Spanish rice, beans and shredded cabbage. The rice was ho-hum, but I fell quickly for the beans. Lightly dusted with a granular cheese, the pintos split the difference between refried and whole. For the most part they were indeed whole beans, but there was a thickness of the sauce between them. They were just lard-y enough.

The snapper itself was of wholly adequate but not outstanding freshness. It wasn't caught that

day (nor, to be fair, was it priced as such). The breading was a little soggy, lacking a satisfying crunch you'd hope the pan frying would provide. Still, it was hearty, worthwhile whitefish, nice and lean.

At first I thought there were two pieces, and I was fully content before uncovering a third hiding underneath. Indeed, I felt like I was getting my money's worth and then some. The accompanying red chili and garlic sauce offered a fine back-of-the-throat spice, though I added plenty of habanero to the now swirled rice, bean and cabbage. Hemeon noticed my affinity and brought me a second serving of sauce. Between the red chiles and the extra habanero, my nose finally began to run. I used a napkin to dab away the welcome perspiration welling up on my cheeks.



The Pescado Rojo (aka Pacific Snapper in spicy red sauce) comes with Spanish rice, beans and shredded cabbage.



The green chile pork burrito comes with a layer of cheese over green chiles, which sits atop a tortilla full of chunks of pork.

I was energized. Ideally filled. Indeed, I wasn't wanting after the fish, but thought it prudent to dip into the green chile pork burrito before leaving. (Or at least I'll paint it with such altruism.) The layer of cheese atop the burrito was enticing, just ever-so-slightly browned. Between it and the tortilla were the green chiles. The layered construction was brilliant. Inside the tortilla were marble-sized chunks of pork, perfectly cooked, tender and supple. I almost couldn't help myself. Just one more bite I said to myself, time after time. I left on cloud nine.

My second trip didn't quite leave me as smitten. The food and the values were comparable but the hospitality less so. I spent this visit in the cantina, which opened five years ago. It's run by

Hemeon's husband, and he lacks her grace and charm. It felt more like being a guest in his home than in a restaurant. In short: Don't expect to be coddled. The cantina is a place for locals first.

Despite the bluster, the house margarita, served tall and balanced nicely between salty and sweet, is a steal at \$5. While seated at the bar I had the Carne Asada (\$13.95), which was a little different that I was expecting. The menu notes the inclusion of salsa fresca, but in reality it resembles more of a thick tomato sauce. Surprise aside, I enjoyed the lean beef and simmering sauce (though I found the snapper and the pork verde superior).

It's also worth noting the difference between lunch and dinner at the Rio: the entrées are duplicate, only offered with additional sides (soup or salad). For instance: Pescado Rojo is \$11.95 at lunch and \$15.95 at dinner. The lunch version is already enough food without soup or salad.

I left the cantina satisfied, but lacking that floaty feeling I found at lunch, on the restaurant side of the building. Much of that came down to presence, the guiding light and soft touch of Hemeon herself. Indeed, I can't well argue with history. If it ain't broke...

## mouth OF THE COLUMBIA

### COAST WEEKEND'S LOCAL RESTAURANT REVIEW

Story and photos by THE MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA • [mouth@coastweekend.com](mailto:mouth@coastweekend.com)

**Rio Cafe**  
Rating: ★ ★ ★ ★

125 Ninth St., Astoria  
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**HOURS:** 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday; 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Tuesday to Thursday; and 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Friday and Saturday.

**PRICE:** \$ — Entrées hover around \$10. Values on the lunch menu are particularly potent.

**SERVICE:** Excellent in the restaurant side, a tad gruff in cantina.

**VEGETARIAN / VEGAN OPTIONS:** A solid array of vegetarian options, provided you eat cheese.

**DRINKS:** Full bar, soda

#### KEY TO RATINGS

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