

El Trio Loco

Gearhart restaurant boasts a long menu, but well-prepared and presented platters

Last August I wrote about the odd and confusing cluster of Mexican restaurants in Gearhart. My review centered around El Mariachi Loco, which received two stars, my lowest rating to date.

From the parking lot of El Mariachi Loco one could look north and spot El Trio Loco. The reason for the duplication, I was told, had something to do with a splitting of family ownership.

Driving by recently, I noticed El Mariachi had closed. As such, I figured a trip to the victor — and the longer-running establishment — was in order.

El Trio Loco's space, with high ceilings, Southwestern pastels, tile work, colorful fake plants and buzzing beer signs, was familiar: the rote Mexican-American template. There are plenty of little spaces throughout, a room for parties, and a large adjoining cantina. It's pretty big — but not big enough to house every dish on the menu, were they served all at once.

El Trio Loco's menu is cumbersome and enormous. It's eight pages long. Eight. Pages. Not counting sides, there are over 120 dishes.

Choosing was excruciating, not only for fear of missing out, but because everything was so similar. A good half of the menu consisted of a meat, served with rice, beans and maybe some veg. Many differences come down to the slightest of details: like the addition of green peppers. Or, say, a "spicy sauce" and a "spicy tasty sauce." The servers, while cordial and warm, didn't excel at narrowing things down. After one returned a third time, I finally had to throw my hands up and just pick something.

When the Molcajete (\$17.95) arrived, in a large, heavy, black stone bowl shaped like a pig, I thought I'd lucked out. Standing on four legs, it was like a bowling ball that had been lopped in half and scooped out. A sort of chili, the beans were bubbling and boiling, steaming, scalding hot. In the center was a cluster of butterflied shrimp, covered with a layer of molten cheddar cheese. Resting around the edge of the bowl and dipping down into the pinto beans were segments of grilled chicken, carne asada and cactus. The beans themselves were cooked with ground chorizo and bits of bacon, a lusciously fatty stew. The shrimp had a bit of barbecue smoke. The chicken had a fine char; it was juicy and well cooked, probably the dishes' standout protein. The asada, peppery and generously seasoned, was one large, thin piece, about the size and thickness of a book's hard-cover. I was happy to find it almost totally gristle-free. Besides a few scallions and a fried jalapeño, a sheet of cactus, cut into fingers, constituted the dish's primary veggie, though its tough,

oily bitterness left me wanting for a better partner. Still, the dish worked — it was a glorious, sinfully carnivorous, succulent stew, presented delightfully. Plus, that thick stone pig bowl kept things piping hot until well-after I'd finished. Unlike when departing its former rival, I left El Trio Loco with a smile, actually looking forward to coming back.

When I did return, I found settling on something to order no easier. I did know, that for the most part, I wanted little to do with the numerous, run-of-the-mill, cookie-cutter combos — you know: two tacos and a burrito, an enchilada and a taco, ad infinity. Mostly I was uninterested in ordering down-menu: Burritos and the like are best saved for counter-service joints, where the quality is similar and the price halved. But, to be fair and sure, I tried the Enchiladas Bandera (\$14.95), which allowed me to sample the three base sauces. The green, quite peppery, was the pointiest of the bunch. The red was smoky and dark, not at all spicy. The cream seemed mostly of sour cream. Oh, and the house habanero hot sauce is certainly worth asking for if you like truly spicy stuff —



The Molcajete, served in a heavy bowl that keeps its contents hot, is a sort of bean chili topped with butterflied shrimp, cheese, grilled chicken, carne asada, scallions and cactus.

There are values to be had at El Trio Loco, like the house Margarita, which, served as a stiff double, is a deal at \$5.95.



it's not only very hot, but non-standard in that the base is a tangy green sauce. The enchiladas, though, were as I suspected: run of the mill.

The Caldo 7 Mares (\$17.95), however, was full of surprise. Partly that's because neither I nor my server knew what exactly the seven seafoods included would be. He came up with three: crab, shrimp and scallops. Regardless, I went for it. I mean, it wasn't as if I was going to feel any more certain with another go-round of the eight-page menu.

The "seven" descriptor turned out to be generous, perhaps a bit fungible. To get there on this particular evening one would have to count shrimp and bay shrimp as separate seafoods. (Maybe we could call it the Caldo 6.5?) Statistics aside, I quite enjoyed it, mostly because it was fun to eat.

Beneath the basic, thin, red tomato and onion broth, I plunged down to haul up hidden treasures. There were little scallops, the aforementioned shrimp, tilapia, octopus, mussels and two crab legs, which jutted up out of the soup. It came with a separate plate for shells and a tool for cracking the crab. With all that snapping and slurping, I wouldn't have minded a bib. None of the plunder was over-cooked — the octopus and the mussels hadn't turned rubbery. But neither was anything here strikingly, off-the-docks fresh. Again, soup succeeded more on experience and variety than any real knockout flavor. It was delivered, puzzlingly, with tortillas, which I had no use for.

But that's kind of El Trio Loco's M.O. — it's not supremely well-reasoned or visionary, but the platters are heaping, well-prepared and presented. And though they're not necessarily cheap, there are values to be had. (Among them is the house Margarita, which, served as a stiff double, is a deal at \$5.95) I imagine there are more gems in the menu, if you've got the patience or luck to find them.

Once thing, though, is abundantly clear: In the competition of the Locos in Gearhart, the better restaurant prevailed, and it wasn't even close.

mouth OF THE COLUMBIA

COAST WEEKEND'S LOCAL RESTAURANT REVIEW

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

El Trio Loco

Rating: ★★★★★

3615 U.S. Hwy 101, Gearhart
503-738-6004

HOURS: 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily

PRICE: \$ – Entrées range from \$9 to \$22

SERVICE: Cordial, warm, but lacking menu expertise

VEGETARIAN / VEGAN OPTIONS: Vegetarians

should do alright; vegans will be somewhat limited

DRINKS: Full bar, coffee and Mexican soda

KEY TO RATINGS

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