

La Cabana D Raya

The Readers' Choice is a good one

For two years running you've crowned La Cabana D Raya "Best Latin Restaurant" in the Readers' Choice Awards. So this week I'm shaking things up. Rather than giving a recommendation, I'm taking yours.

The weather on my first trip was absolutely gorgeous — sunny, clear and warm, infinite blue sky to go with freshly sun-kissed cheeks.

It felt like the first day of spring, and certainly highlighted La Cabana's unique location — steps from the water at the south end of the old Youngs Bay Bridge.

While brisk winds precluded outdoor dining the large, west-facing windows offered sweeping views of the bay and an abundance of natural light. One group, overwhelmed by beams refracting off the water, swapped tables for one less sunny.

Despite a picturesque locale, La Cabana is a funky old building, lashed together, rattled but still upright. Salvaged booths differ; walls, corners and ceilings have gaps, repaired with unfinished plywood and pressboard. The checkered tile floor seems less than level. With dips and bumps it slopes slightly toward the bay. The walls are decorated with branded advertisements and colorful Mexican ephemera. Rough and scuffed as it is, the bay provides plenty of gentle ambiance.

On this evening the restaurant was packed and bustling. One customer told me it was always this way. A steady stream of takeout orders came and went, too. Many of them were prepared quickly enough where the wait was minimal. All of the customers were handled by one waitress, who absolutely crushed it. She did so efficiently, with understanding and gracious cheer.

Of everything I had at La Cabana, nothing came close to the Empanadas (\$11) — they were absolutely delightful. Deep-fried, golden-browned, flaky on the outside, soft and steaming on the inside, it was as good as any pastry I've had on the North Coast. So warm, cozy and inviting, I wanted to crawl inside.

In each of the two doughy love-bundles I had a different pork. While each worked, I recommend the al pastor, whose seasoning and spices offered greater depth. Both were stuffed with melted, gooey, stretchy mozzarella cheese. A topping of sour cream offered a bitter note, and the accompanying veggies a wisp of freshness. Rarely found on the North Coast, I had only one qualm with these glorious empanadas: that I can't buy them a la carte. Whether it's a single one for a snack or a bag full to share, I'd love the option to indulge further.

The Mole (\$11), however, was less enticing. With no discernible chocolate in the base, it resembled more a red enchilada sauce — one that was slightly peanuty and overwhelmingly salty. It may have been salted twice by

mistake. It was almost inedible.

With red, green and orange bell peppers, Guisado (\$11) is one of the more colorful, enticing presentations. With onions and peppers, it's an oily, minimally spiced, stew-like dish whose essence is a little apart from the rest, more European, less Mexican.

Another dish that combines regional flavors, the Torta (\$8) is like a bigger burger. The bread is buttery and heavy, almost like a challah, soft and steadfast. It's light on the veggies and fully of soft creaminess — cheese and avocado. The addition of jalapeños — which I was asked about beforehand — was pointy and quite welcome. And in this burger-like form, the asada was better-seasoned than most any patty around. Served by itself, it also felt a little spendy.

On another trip, I tried the Trio (\$9), a sampler that comes with a taco, sope and gordita.

The taco featured a made-to-order tortilla which was scantily filled with a nicely seasoned, not-too-gristle-y asada, onions and cilantro. It disappeared in about three bites.

The sope was hearty, its puffy, thick, tortilla mattress had a delicate texture. It was coated with beans, chunks of juicy pork and topped with lettuce, sour cream and crumbled queso fresco.



This gordita was filled with peppery chicken.



Carne asada tacos take about three bites to finish.

The gordita split the difference between the other two. A pocket filled with peppery chicken, a hint of lime and the rest, it was a swell delivery vehicle.

The Fish Taco (\$3.50) featured a breaded whitefish that ran the length of the tortilla. It had a nice crunch, though I'd prefer more sour cream than mayo.

Nonetheless, I'd recommend it above the Ceviche Taco (\$3.50), which was pint-sized. The whitefish (likely tilapia) was lean and bright, but there wasn't much of it. And though it was pictured in the menu, there wasn't any avocado. Just fish, onions, cilantro and lime juice; it needed a little zip, which the house's bright green sauce and lightly smoky red offered. But they didn't have any heat. I asked for a hotter sauce and re-

ceived a habaero escabeche that left my tongue smoldering.

Tacos with land-dwelling proteins are \$2.50, and they're tiny. At happy hour (2:30-5:30 p.m., weekdays) they're \$1.50, a price more in-line with what you get. (The \$3.50 "chef style" tacos add lettuce, tomato and sour cream.) Same goes for the burritos — the \$5 happy hour price is the right one.

There are beer specials during those hours too, but if you're in search of spirits, I implore you: try the Mangoneada (\$7). The blended, icy base of mango and tequila is spiced with Tajin (lime and chili) and the savory Chamoy. The mango's creaminess softens the tequila's bite. It almost becomes a sorbet, not overly sweet or syrupy. Indeed, it would make a great shared desert. And to be sure: the Mangoneada is more than a mango-flavored margarita — it's its own distinct thing.

To that end, I wish La Cabana experimented more. Their menu is short, same-y, and made mostly of standards you'll find at just about every Americanized Mexican restaurant. When they dip outside those lines — like with the empanadas or the Mangoneada — the results are deliciously memorable.

Nevertheless, dear readers, I know now why you love La Cabana D Raya. It's got a pristine view, an upbeat, super-casual vibe, and it's quick, easy and reasonably priced. Thanks for the tip!

mouth

OF THE COLUMBIA

COAST WEEKEND'S LOCAL RESTAURANT REVIEW

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

La Cabana D Raya

Rating: ★★★★★

35431 U.S. Highway 101 Business
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HOURS: 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday-Saturday.

PRICE: \$ — The most expensive dish is \$11.

SERVICE: Gracious, experienced and fast.

VEGETARIAN/VEGAN OPTIONS: Vegetarians can make do, but vegans are out of luck.

DRINKS: Mexican soda, beer, a few house cocktails.

KEY TO RATINGS

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