

# MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local  
restaurant review

## Looking for comfortable, Americanized Mexican food? Search no more.

Review and photos by  
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**O**ne of 18 restaurants dotting mostly northern Oregon and southern Washington, El Tapatio is part of a chain. But the Astoria outpost is modeled after something far more prevalent: the simplified, streamlined, Americanized Mexican restaurant.

You know the place: a menu that's pages long, full of pictures and enough dishes to make your head spin. (Don't worry: They're all quite similar.) Tapatio too has the neon Corona signs, the painted bricks, the pastel Southwestern palate, the bowl-sized Margarita glasses, combo menus and so on. It's the kind of place that, rather than street-style, serves tacos in hard shells and eschews delicacies like cow tongue. Even if you've never been, your first visit to Tapatio will feel awfully familiar.

And there's nothing ostensibly wrong with that. Familiarity is why chains proliferate. And hey, sometimes a big ol' plate of rice and beans, some grilled meat, free chips and salsa plus a sloshing margarita can really hit the spot. Rather than "authentic," as it's touted, I equate Tapatio to comfort food. It's easy, heavy and known.

Tapatio's home, a second floor overlooking the buzzing Marine Drive in Uniontown, is a fine perch. Stare out the windows at the cars whizzing below, dip another chip, sip from that big, billowing glass, and wonder: Where is everyone going in such a hurry?

As do all trips to Tapatio, mine began with the prompt delivery of free, warm corn chips and watery salsa. I added a Grande Margarita (\$8.95), only to later discover they're all "grande." The limey, orangey, synthetic fruit mix was matched with reasonable potency.

I scoured the menu in search of specialties. When I asked servers

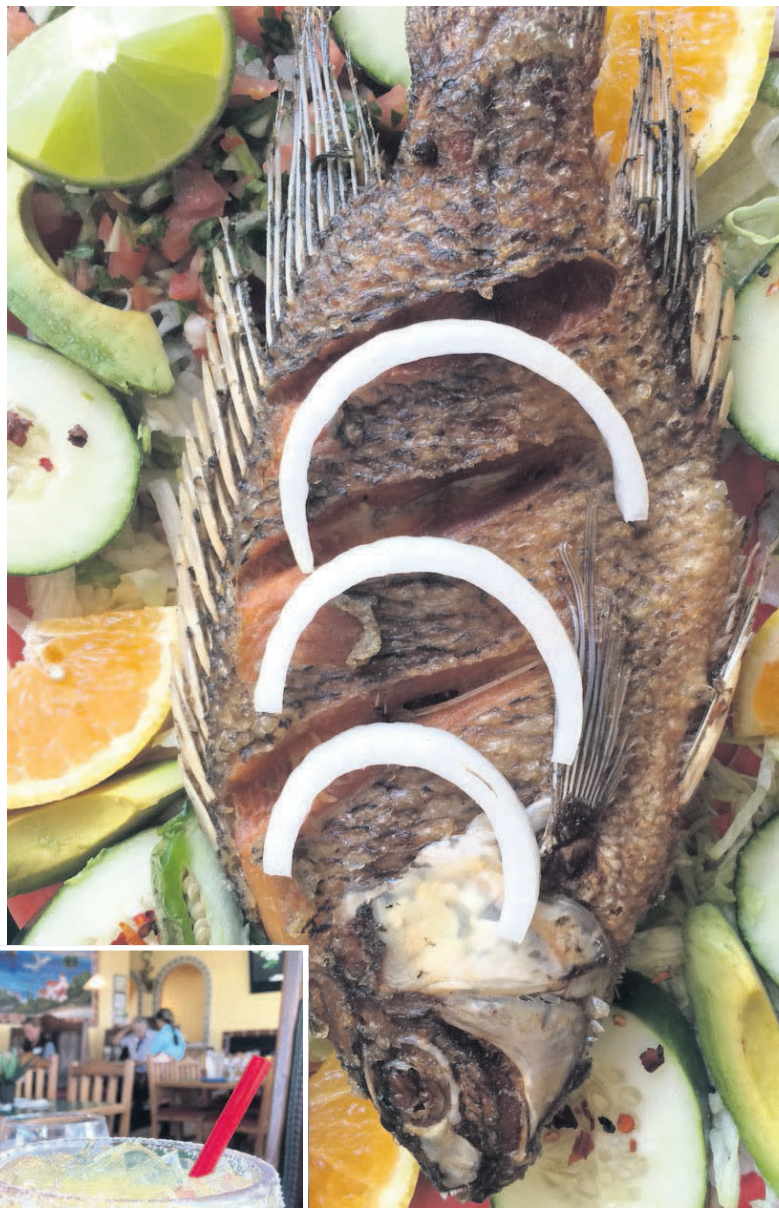
of their favorites the answers were less than inspired: "The burritos are really good, and the enchiladas too." I pressed: "If you were going to eat here, is that what you'd have?" "Uhm, yeah," they said.

And while I'd eventually get to the burrito, I was stuck on finding a flagship. I settled on the Pescado Frito (\$17.95), a whole tilapia, fried with the skin on, head and all. When it arrived I perked up. "That's lovely," I blathered. Like a colorful clock, the fish was ringed by dots of avocado, cucumber and orange slices. The oranges, I thought, were odd — perhaps form over function. When I squeezed them onto the fish the juice seemed to all but evaporate. Lemon should've been the thing.

With lightly crisped skin, the fish itself was rather dry. Its life seemed far off, either frozen for ages, overcooked or both. As I dug the white flecks out from between the hundreds of tiny bones I wondered: How could such a small creature have so many bones? As opposed to outright flavor, the Pescado Frito was far more successful as experience — both aesthetic and biology lesson.

In terms of simple execution, I preferred the Carne Asada (\$13.95). On a platter with refried beans, Spanish rice and wilted green onion shoots, the beef was juicy, charred, peppered and quite salty. It was thin, but not too thin. And, compared to the tilapia, it played better with the accompanying beans, rice and tortillas.

On my second trip I had the Camarones Monterey (\$13.95), aka bacon-wrapped shrimp.



**Above:** Though impressive looking, the Pescado Frito was rather dry and suffered from many fish bones.

**Left:** Astoria's El Tapatio serves comfortable, Americanized Mexican food.



Equal parts fatty and lean, crisp and softly fibrous, the tightly wound, cheese-covered pairs were enjoyable — indeed, it's hard to go wrong with bacon-wrapped shrimp. They could've been bigger, moister, spiced, more carefully prepared. But they worked.

By this time everything at Tapatio was becoming rather same-y —

refried beans, a little bit of cheese melted on top, barely-seasoned red rice, plus a dollop of sour cream here, guacamole there, perhaps a sprinkling of clumpy pico de gallo, a pinch of lettuce and choice of meat. Of the nearly 100 menu items, the lion's share could be distilled to a handful: animal protein and, perhaps, sauce.

### EL TAPATIO

**Rating:** ★★

**229 W. Marine Drive,  
Astoria**

**PHONE:** 503-325-1248

**HOURS:** 11 a.m. to 10 p.m.  
daily.

**PRICE:** \$ — Most entrées hover in the teens.

**SERVICE:** Prompt, cheerful

**VEGETARIAN / VEGAN**

**OPTIONS:** Vegetarians will get by, options for vegans are slim.

**DRINKS:** Full bar, soda

#### KEY TO STAR RATING SYSTEM

- ★ Poor
- ★★ Below average
- ★★★ Good
- ★★★★ Excellent
- ★★★★★ Best in region

I tried the Fajita Burrito (\$12.95) too. It was enormous and by the numbers — another dish at Tapatio in search of specific identity. Or, maybe just the same, its identity is to have none in particular. As with comfort food, surprise is generally unwelcome.

Somewhere along the way, seeking a shot in the arm, I asked if there were any special house hot sauces. A server came back with a bowl of habanero paste. "Be careful," he said. "Very, very hot."

He needn't have been so concerned. In the smoky, peppery, burnt orange blend, the habanero's flame had been tamped out. My cheeks remained dry, my tongue at leisure. The deep-fried jalapeño I'd chomped on earlier marshaled many more scoval units.

Each time while leaving Tapatio I remember feeling very little. Like the hot sauce, it didn't knock my socks off — I'd wanted to go all the way. But then, what chains do?