

# Guajito's rolls out familiar hits of Mexican cuisine

Review and photos by  
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**O**n Broadway, between Holladay and Roosevelt streets, the entrance to Seaside's tourist mecca is changing.

For years, the block was dominated by the McKeown family. In 2015, the company added to its portfolio the Firehouse Grill which, along with The Irish Pub, Nonni's Italian Bistro and McKeown's Restaurant & Bar, put them in charge of four of the five eateries on the block.

Last spring, they downsized, shuttering McKeown's Restaurant & Bar and transforming the back half into the Hawaii-themed Lilikoi Grill (which offered a delectable braised pork shank). The "aloha" was brief: The Lilikoi, along with the long-running Irish Pub, closed earlier this year. Mahalo. (What's "goodbye" in Irish?)

The front half of the former McKeown's building is now home to the glistening Tom's Fish and Chips (the second location of Cannon Beach's take on fast food). And the Lilikoi portion has given way to Guajito's Mexican Restaurant, where, besides some Mexican-styled fabric on the booths, the interior has changed little. It's spacious, airy and easy, with a looming bar at the rear.

Guajito's owners are from Warrenton. It's their first restaurant. In assembling a menu, it seems they surveyed what most other Mexican restaurants in the region were offering and said: "Yo también." That means the rolling out the hits: well-known familiars like carne asada, Camarones Monterey, enchiladas, burritos and so on.

The menu, thankfully, is confined to a single page (front and back). As these restaurants so often do, meals at Guajito's



Carne asada

begin with complimentary chips and salsa. Guajito's adds refried beans. I married the salsa and beans and was happy I did. (I would later add some of the wholly manageable habanero salsa, too.) While we're in well-trodden territory, it's worth noting that the complimentary salsa is a little more lively than usual. And while thin, it's not like dipping your chip in tomato-onion water.

The menu does wrangle a few outliers, like a T-bone steak and pork chops. I was reeled in by the Godornis (\$14.95), a game hen served with rice, beans and tortillas. But preparation took the fun out of it, and the flavor. To be sure: Game hens are merely small chickens (and not to be confused with quail or pheasant). Presentation distinguishes these hens from chickens on your plate (that, and they're quick to cook). The value is mostly perception: being served your very own, tiny, whole bird. Guajito's slices the hen down the center, disrupting that visual. Then it's charred to near oblivion, leaving the scarce meat dull and dry.

The al pastor, on the other hand, was delightful; I had it in

a taco (\$3.25). The meat was supple, coated in a dark, smoky, bitter red sauce. Of the array of street-style tacos (missing lengua here), I also tried the fish (\$4.50). The modest cut of grilled tilapia was slightly blackened. It was of admirable quality and cooked more carefully. (No more fish sticks!) Still, with only pico de gallo, it called out for something more — the addition of, say, sour cream and shredded cabbage, or maybe a sweet mango. The helping of salty chorizo crumbles was more generous, but pressing up against the \$3.25 price.

Indeed, at Guajito's there are a few eyebrow-raising values. Not enough to make your jaw drop, but chin-strokers nonetheless. Like \$6.95 for cucumber slices with chili powder and lime. Or, take the case of the Chile Relleno: You can get the cheese-stuffed poblano pepper with an enchilada as part of a combination for \$12.95. With the addition of a few underwhelming shrimp, but no accompanying enchilada, the Seafood Chile Relleno runs \$16.95.

For what it's worth, I preferred the shrimp-less version anyway;



Fish taco



Godornis (game hen)

it felt more unified, less sloppy. Either way, the chile relleno boasted fresher poblano peppers than most nearby Mexican joints. Indeed, while many seem to come from a can, Guajito's poblanos boasted an earthy vitality.

Over several trips I beckoned servers for recommendations. Each time, without hesitation, the answer was carne asada. At first I fought it. I wondered if this was just the suggestion that's given to Americans and to tourists — that they'll be happy with good ol', simple beef. Eventually I bit and ordered the Carne Asada plate (\$14.95).

At first glance I was taken aback: There wasn't a whole lot of the skirt steak, sliced thin as cardboard. But a bite proved why indeed it had been highlighted: Not only was it higher-grade than what's commonly offered, it was also perfectly cooked. Salty and peppery, it was tender enough to split without a knife, and both charred and juicy. There was no gristle or excess fat — every last bit edible and enjoyable. It smacked of a charcoal grill.

But I'd be remiss to say that I wasn't — and that I'm not —

## GUAJITO'S

Rating: ★★ ★

714 BROADWAY ST.,  
SEASIDE, ORE., 97138

PHONE: 503-738-6068

HOURS: Wednesday through Thursday 11 a.m. to 9 p.m., Friday through Saturday 11 a.m. to 10 p.m., Sunday-Monday 11 a.m. to 9 p.m.

PRICE: \$ entrées range from the tens to high-teens

SERVICE: Quick, smiling, brief  
VEGETARIAN/VEGAN OPTIONS: Mostly meaty, very little for vegans

DRINKS: Full bar, soda, juice

### KEY TO STAR RATING SYSTEM

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

searching for a little more than carne asada (not to mention the ever-present refried beans, Spanish rice and tortillas from a bag). There are half a dozen Mexican restaurants in Seaside — more than there are pizzerias, Chinese and just about anything besides pub food. And in that, I'm hopeful that more of those restaurants — Guajito's among them — will bring a little more of their individuality, creativity and expression to the table. That could mean anything from more traditional, less-Americanized offerings, to striking out in new directions.

Whatever form it may take, I'm confident that the North Coast's vital Mexican-American community has more culinary delights to share. In the meantime, Guajito's has changed the makeup of Broadway, but not yet the landscape.