

# MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local  
restaurant review

## Plaza Jalisco serves up one-note comfort food

Review and photos by  
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**T**he server told me: “Don’t cry.” But it was too late. The hot sauce had me blubbing. My face broadcast the burn like a billboard: cheeks welled up and rosy, eyes watering and a nose like a leaky faucet. My lips tingled and I noticed myself actually panting, as if freeing my sizzling tongue from an overwhelmed mouth would offer some respite.

There was more that the server couldn’t see: the dynamite blasting of my sinuses, ear canals reverberating like wind tunnels and the burst of endorphins perking up a sleepy winter evening.

At first I thought the Plaza Jalisco Mexican Restaurant’s special house-made sauce was the culprit. But I started low and slow, with just a dab of that dark, sun-burnt, smoky red paste. It was more fire than flavor, so I retreated. But the heat persisted.

As it turned out, the fuel of that scorching paste was also a key ingredient in the sauce of my main course. That ingredient: chiles de árbol. Every bite

of the Camarones a la Diabla (\$14.50, described in the menu as “slightly hot,”) caused the flames to reignite like bellows on a fire.

For reference: árbol (aka the “tree chile,” “bird’s beak chile” or “rat’s tail chile”) range from 15,000 to 30,000 units on the Scoville scale. Jalapeño peppers fall between 2,500 and 8,000, Tabasco sauce 2,500 to 5,000. Habaneros, near the top, register between 100,000 and 350,000 units.

Now, heat can be just as much

about what kind of peppers you use as how many of them make it to the pot. I suspect the árbol were tossed liberally into my batch of Camarones a la Diabla (i.e., “The devil’s shrimp”).

But let’s be clear: My recounting the spice story is not meant as a jab at Plaza Jalisco. I was searching for heat, and they delivered. (I was told there is an even hotter house-made sauce, though they were out at the time.) Indeed, I consider myself a hot sauce connoisseur and evangelist for spicy foods. As the tagline of a tinder-box of a Mexican joint in my hometown went: “Peace through pain.” I bought in.

The árbol sauce pushed me toward that precipice. It was a head-spinner. Not quite a punishing ordeal but an experience, to be sure.

And it’s what I’ll remember most from my trips to the Astoria restaurant ... because the flavors were rote and forgettable.

Plaza Jalisco offers a facsimile of what you’ll find at the majority of Americanized Mexican restaurants in the region: a menu with pages and pages of dishes that stack sameness and but few degrees of separation. Almost everything comes with lardy refried beans and insipid Spanish rice. Veggies are scant. There’s little freshness or nuance to speak of. Much of it tastes like it came from a can.

It is, I think, a bit remarkable that so many competing restaurants have menus nearing 100 dishes, almost all of them overlapping. Ever been to El Tapatio, on the east end of Astoria? Plaza Jalisco’s food couldn’t be more similar. A blind taste test to figure who’s who would be quite a challenge. And that’s just part of the



Camarones a la Diabla



Tres amigos: chile Colorado, chile verde, chile relleno, with rice and beans

sameness in Astoria. There’s more, dotting the coast.

Plaza Jalisco, like El Tapatio, is part of a small chain with six restaurants in Washington. In the Astoria location you’ll find the familiar, monochrome spectrum of Americanized Mexican: enchiladas, burritos, free chips, watery salsa and the damned combo plates.

What you won’t find: an array of street-style tacos, fresh veggies, developed flavors or margaritas made without oodles of cane syrup. There’s no al pastor, lengua or chicharrón. The meats that do make the cut are thin, overcooked and under-seasoned. The carne asada and pollo asado had a BBQ-like char but cried out for salt to seal in the juices.

At Plaza Jalisco you’ll find reasonable, sometimes teeming portions. The Burrito Carne Asada (\$13.50) was the length of two regular burritos stuck end to end. I wished some

of that interior included veggies, avocado or sour cream (which were sprinkled conservatively on top). Some onions or pico de gallo inside would’ve been nice, too. As it was, the massive burrito was stuffed with just beans, rice and that under-seasoned carne asada. Rather than one of Plaza Jalisco’s top burritos (and the second most expensive), it banished complexity as if angling for the kids menu.

Plaza Jalisco is also built for speed. I was amazed how quickly some dishes landed on my table. The Tres Amigos (\$16.95), one of the flagship items, arrived in little more time that it takes to scoop the components onto the plate. Two sips of the syrupy margarita and — boom! — there it is.

The sauces on the Tres Amigos — chile Colorado and chile verde — were bland, almost opaque in flavor if not color. It was as if the dice-sized cubes of beef and pork had not been marinated, cooking in them. The hardly fresh poblano pepper in the chile relleno was slathered and filled with viscous cheese. Even in its stasis, the poblano’s earthiness was magnified alongside the melange of meaty, fatty and cheesy.

Against the árbol sauce, the shrimp in the Camarones a la Diabla offered a bit of sweetness. The enchiladas were slim and boring. The pollo asado was tough. Nothing stepped

### PLAZA JALISCO MEXICAN RESTAURANT

Rating: ★★↘

212 Eighth St.  
Astoria, Ore., 97103

503-338-4440

Hours: 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Sunday through Thursday, 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Friday and Saturday

Price: \$ – Most dishes hover between \$10 and \$15

Service: Speedy, jovial and personable

Vegetarian / Vegan Options: Vegans need not apply

Drinks: Full bar

#### KEY TO STAR RATING SYSTEM

- ★ Poor
- ★★ Below average
- ★★★ Worth returning
- ★★★★ Very good
- ★★★★★ Excellent, best in region

outside the homogenized lane of Americanized Mexican.

As with any restaurant touting authenticity, I entered in hopes of finding something inspired, perfected or new. On that score I came out empty-handed. Plaza Jalisco’s is comfort food, a single note hammered continuously.

While the food is carbon-copied, Plaza Jalisco does deserve credit for its welcoming vibe. (And although the decor matches the model with bricky pastels and wooden booths, the plants are actually real!) It’s a place folks come to celebrate, and staff seem up to the task.

On one trip a server gamely translated a Spanish-language cover song playing on the stereo in hopes I could find the source. I also overheard that same server being profusely thanked by a customer for treating her special-needs child with resounding care at a recent birthday party. Then there was the server who prodded me, with a welcome and deserved mix of pity and jest over my struggles with the árbol sauce.

I’ll remember the heat at Plaza Jalisco. The flavor, not so much. 