

eat & drink

The Kansas Katie at Cantina 1910

Revolution in Andersonville

Cantina 1910 impresses with imaginative Mexican cuisine

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

God, I love a good chimichanga. And fried ice cream. And seafood enchiladas stuffed with krill-sized shrimp and fake crab meat smothered in sherry-cream sauce, aka Enchiladas Cancun from the now-defunct Tex Mex-themed franchise Chi-Chi's (a chain founded in the authentic Southwestern town of Richfield, Minnesota).

REVIEW
Cantina 1910
5025 N. Clark St.
773-506-1910
★★★★☆
Off to a good start

Don't get me wrong. I generally love authentic regional Mexican cuisine. There are hundreds of taquerias in this city. Some are fabulous, serving slow-simmered moles and hand-griddled tortillas. But the problem is that many of the so-called authentic places serve under-seasoned, over-steamed protein swaddled in dry, cakey corn tortillas. Uninspired by so much middling Mex, I'd grown nostalgic for American-Mexican plates and, frankly, become pretty cynical. When I heard someone was trying to do upscale Mexican in Andersonville at a place called Cantina 1910, I imagined bros doing carne asada shooters while patrons danced on the bar lapping up the drops from tequila-filled bongos. Boy, was I ever wrong.

THE SCENE

It turns out 1910 doesn't represent some cutesy nod to an address or a random assortment of numbers. It's an invocation of the year the Mexican Revolution started, when the people of Mexico threw off the yolk of European influence and embraced the richness of their indigenous culture. The dining room at Cantina is beautiful and filled with rough-hewn woods, rich cornflower blue and white textile-lined banquettes, a gleaming deco-inspired bar and a cool installation of globe lanterns.

THE CHEF

Cantina 1910 executive chef Diana Dávila has done some serious kitchen time. In 2001, she was the executive chef at her parents' fine dining Mexican restaurant Hacienda Jalapenos in Oak Forest, where she got favorable write-ups from Chicago Tribune's Phil Vettel and the Sun-Times' late Pat Bruno. For the rest of the decade, she worked at the now-defunct but celebrated Butter with Ryan Poli; Boka with Giuseppe Tentori; and the defunct Courtright's in Willow Springs, which also launched the careers of chefs like Ryan McCaskey of Acadia and Aaron Lirette of GreenRiver. She ran some major kitchens in Washington, D.C., after that. Like chef Paul Virant (Perennial Virant, Vie Restaurant), she is a stout preservationist, pickling and canning chilis and tomatoes and vowing to serve most everything at Cantina 1910 from producers within a 200-mile radius of Chicago. When I interviewed her, she had a mouth like a sailor and the attitude of a conqueror. I've not been as interested, amused and inspired by a chef like this since I met El Ideas' irreverent Phillip Foss.

THE FOOD

Dávila's cuisine is rooted in Mexican tradition but inspired by local ingredients. It's also very thoughtful. When most people make tacos al pastor, they obliterate trimmings of flavorless pork with chili and annatto seed and bury the meat under cloying bits of pineapple. Dávila marinates spit-roasted pork (taken from whole

RATINGS KEY ***** DEAD UPON ARRIVAL
***** PROCEED WITH CAUTION ***** GIVE IT SOME TIME
***** TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT ***** OFF TO A GOOD START
***** HEATING UP ***** ALREADY HOT



Chips and salsa at Cantina 1910

hogs the restaurant breaks down weekly) with annatto, raspberries and raisins. The meat is carved into big caramelized chunks, wrapped in a tortilla and topped with tangy tomatillo and wispy strands of wheat grass. The addition of the wheat grass is a cute play on the fact that al pastor translates to “from the pasture.” I swore the lithe tortillas, which wafted a fresh corn perfume, were made in-house. They are not, one of the few things not made from scratch in the Cantina 1910 kitchen, but they are made locally by El Popocatepetl in Pilsen. “If you can’t make bomb-ass tortillas, and someone else can, you should let them do that and focus on the things you can do great,” Dávila said. Indeed. These are the best tacos al pastor (two for \$8) in Chicago.

Dávila researched historical ceviche-making techniques, and instead of just dousing raw seafood in lime, she takes a Midwestern fish such as walleye (\$17) and painstakingly cures it in a brine of burnt corn husk and nixtamal (lime-cured corn), then marinates it in a mix of sunflower oil, pink peppercorn and coriander. The flesh of the walleye is firm and flavored with limey notes and a touch of spice from the peppercorns. It’s topped with fried crunchy peels of sweet potato and sits on a swoosh of sweet potato puree. Ceviches are often served as jumbled bits in cocktail glasses, but this plate looked like a natural forest scene.

Even something simple, like Dávila’s chips and salsa, is a wonderful reminder that you get what you pay for. At \$7, they are not free, nor is the salsa some pedestrian pico de gallo. The appetizer is served with two salsas and a jar of encurtidos—freshly pickled spicy carrots, peppers and cauliflower. One of the salsas, a green pumpkin seed mole, is grassy and



Tacos al pastor at Cantina 1910

herbaceous. Another, a ranchero sauce rich with tomato, onion and chili blended with farm carrots and topped with crispy charred carrot tops, is complex with a subtle sweetness. Dávila’s salsas are so good, I realize that all the plastic squirt bottles of blazing hot, vinegary red and green stuff served elsewhere around town should probably be destroyed.

The only thing I have any issue with is her Cemita sandwich (\$16). The innards—a creamy slather of black beans and smoky pasilla chili sauce, that lovely al pastor, a thinly pounded fried chicken cutlet, Oaxacan cheese, avocado, onion and zesty papalo leaves—is equal to the high-quality stuff served at Cemitas Puebla. But the sesame-seed bun, which is baked in-house with unbleached Wisconsin wheat flour, was dry and heavy. The bottom was soaked through and couldn’t stand up to the filling.

DESSERT AND DRINKS

Beverage director Michael Fawthrop is making some pretty good libations. My favorite

was the Meloncotes (\$12), a Mexican riff on a champagne cocktail made with tequila, Becherovka (an herbal digestif) and sparkling wine that is bitter, fruity and rife with peach notes. I also enjoyed a glass of Antxiola Txakolina (\$13), which tastes like lime and slate and has a highly acidic almost fizzy finish that cuts nicely through Dávila’s piquant food.

I would have awarded Cantina 1910 a higher rating if it were not for dessert. Though they were both imaginative and beautifully composed, the flavors and textures on both desserts I tried were disappointing. The chocolate de la tierra (\$12) featured a dome of jiggly chocolate pudding that reminded me of a Hostess Sno Ball. It was ringed by an under-fried churro topped with a tortilla-flavored cream that was so thick it was about one or two whips from becoming butter. The corn notes of the cream didn’t meld well with the chocolate. In theory, the tortilla flavors would have worked with the spiced blackberries rimming the plate, but those blackberries were sour and unripe.

The chamoyada (\$12) featured a slushy granita of cantaloupe, bits of cantaloupe gel and fresh and pickled peach cubes. The granita was fine, but many pieces of the fruit were hard and unripe. There was also a dollop of vanilla bean ice cream buried in the mix. It was half melted when the plate arrived. The other half of the un-melted ice cream was gummy and chewy like it had been made with too much gummy stabilizer. I would have killed for a nice dollop of fried ice cream.

BOTTOM LINE

Cantina 1910 serves some of the most imaginative and well-executed Mexican food made from local ingredients in Chicago. Frankly, the offerings here might be slightly better than the excellent fare at Frontera Grill, something you might want to consider if you find yourself stuck in a long line at one of Rick Bayless’s great restaurants.

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