

eat & drink

Empanada de camarón (clockwise from top),
slow-roasted pork plate with yellow rice
and sweet plantains, and steak jibaritos
with chihuahua cheese.
LENNY GILMORE/REDEYE PHOTOS



Steak jibaritos at The Jibarito Stop

\$7.99 at 1646 W. 18th St. 312-988-0585

WORTH A TRIP

By Michael Nigrant | FOR REDEYE

It's not often I give great thanks to corporate America or the Chicago bureaucracy. But on this occasion—with a stomach full of the best Puerto Rican food I've had in Chicago in a while—a salute is in order. For without corporate America, Cely Rodriguez (a former paralegal) and Moraima Fuentes (a former counselor for a nonprofit), friends, dreamers and purveyors of the great Puerto Rican eats of which I speak, might not have opened their excellent new Pilsen restaurant The Jibarito Stop. “We used to sit around and talk about how there has to be more to life than doing the 9-to-5 thing,” Fuentes said. “We were tired. We wanted to be passionate, to create something and make a contribution to society and fill a need.”

The trials of cubicle clock-watching did not make the restaurant. It originally launched as a food truck by the same name. But there was a catch. The Jibarito Stop was one of the early food trucks launched in Chicago when city laws didn't allow live onboard cooking, only commissary-produced food. Rodriguez and Fuentes couldn't even sell the namesake sandwich because a pre-prepared jibarito would



Moraima Fuentes (from left) and Cely Rodriguez, owners of The Jibarito Stop, stand with employees at the Pilsen eatery.

be soggy by the time it was served to patrons. When Chicago changed its food truck laws to allow on-truck cooking, Rodriguez and Fuentes were already planning a permanent brick-and-mortar location on 18th Street, and they reasoned that retrofitting the truck to make jibaritos would be too costly.

Though Pilsen is a South Side neighborhood rich with Mexican culture, Fuentes and Rodriguez chose to serve their Puerto Rican fare there. "When we first opened, we were intimidated about going downtown," Fuentes said. "We both lived here [in Pilsen] and we brought the truck here instead and people loved it." Fuentes, who oversees the front of the house, is Mexican and was raised in Little Village. Rodriguez, who does the cooking, is Puerto Rican and grew up in the Bronx, N.Y.

"She wasn't trained as a cook, but when Cely came here, she was homesick, so she started cooking her mom's recipes—the stuff she grew up eating," Fuentes said. "When I first ate it, I was like, 'Whoa, you're a great cook! We have to open a restaurant.'"

It's hard to believe Rodriguez isn't trained, for her seasoning and execution are much better than that of a lot of the fare I've sampled from so many culinary school grads this year. Her empanadas de camarón, flaky half-moons dappled with hot oil marks, are loaded with fat shrimp and fluffy, steaming, chili-stained potato (\$2.99 each). A platter of slow-roasted pork shoulder (\$9.99 with rice and one side) is so tender and silky that eating a plate of the stuff conjures the same kind of satisfaction and security one feels when wrapped in a fleece blanket on a frigid day. Rodriguez's arroz con gandules (\$2.99), yellow rice with pigeon peas, is unlike so many around town and features distinct

toothsome grains and firm, creamy peas.

If you've never had the restaurant's namesake dish, jibaritos, here's what you need to know: They're sandwiches that sub in smashed, deep-fried plantains for bread. Though they're often thought to be native to Puerto Rico, jibaritos were invented in 1996 by Juan Figueroa as a means of saving his fledgling business, the now-defunct Borinquen Cafe in Humboldt Park (El Nuevo Borinquen occupies the space today and also serves jibaritos). The original Borinquen served the best version for years, but the quality declined over time. Many others started to make the sandwich, but I usually found something wrong with each one—not enough salt, soggy plantains, the meat wasn't good or the sandwich wasn't garlicky enough.

Rodriguez's jibarito (\$7.99, includes rice) features wafer-thin crispy plantains glistening with a pungent garlic glaze. The steak or beef knuckle inside is tender and well-salted. Though the original jibarito was made with American cheese, and you can order it that way at The Jibarito Stop, I chose chihuahua cheese, which added a satisfying, creamy, quesadilla-like decadence to the whole thing. Rodriguez's jibarito might be better than the original that was served at Borinquen.

The Jibarito Stop is only the first step for Fuentes and Rodriguez. "Every town seems to have a famous Mexican restaurant. We hope to make Puerto Rican food just as accessible," Fuentes said. With food as good as theirs, that seems like a not-too-distant reality.

MICHAEL NAGRANT IS A REDEYE CONTRIBUTOR.

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