



diningout

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A MIXED GRILL Hits, misses pepper the Colombian steakhouse menu at La Parrilla

The patacones con carne asada is a trio of crispy, fried green plantains piled high with well-seasoned, juicy steak bites tossed with tomatoes and sauteed onions. | JOHN KIM - SUNTIMES PHOTOS

Everything I know about Colombia can be summed up thusly: Shakira, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Sofia Vergara and Pablo Escobar. Through just as America is not made up of a bunch of hamburger-eating cowboys, I recognize Colombia is not only about belly-shaking pop singers, Nobel Prize-winning magical realists, boomtown brunette bombshells, and cocaine-slinging drug lords. That is why I'd schlepped out to the Dunming neighborhood on Chicago's northwest side to check out La Parrilla, a new Colombian Steakhouse.

I'd hoped to discover more of the culture by eating a little dinner. I did and I didn't. I'd tried this exercise once before at the Colombian steakhouse Las Tablas in Lake View. Unfortunately, all I discovered there was the poor man's version of the all-you-can-eat churrascerias, where faux gauchos sport Mc Hammer punts and red bandoleros as around their necks while hawkling over-salted meat impaled on glinting swords. (In Las Tablas' case, there were no swords,



For dessert, La Parrilla serves up a cream-battered flan, courtesy of a purveyor known as the "flan lady." The classic treat is drizzled with burnt molasses caramel sauce.

just plates piled high with rubbery second-rate mystery meat and recent college grads doing shots of ETOB tequila and dancing on chairs.) And given that, if I love La Parrilla for anything, it's because it is the antithesis of Las Tablas — small, quiet, bright, inviting and run by a gracious family from Cali, the third-largest city in Colombia. The family scene, Jorge McCormick, is the most affable host/maitre d'/food-runner, a man who stops just beneath his ear on the regular to listen to his guests,

and also to pepper them with the pride of his culture. Spread thin, McCormick forgets to bring a salad we order until late in the meal and can't keep up refilling drinks and the baskets of chinchichu, which my table requires every five minutes. McCormick's mom is the executive chef. Her empanadas are not the familiar, flaky Argentinian pastry-style, but instead a rustic fried corn meal with homied meat and ricotta, a style true to her native Cali. They are crisp and stuffed with comforting filling — truly one of



LEFT: The classic churrasco platter at La Parrilla doesn't live up to its billing, due to a less-than-tender New York Strip steak.

the best, on par with my previous favorite empanadas served at the Lake View coffee shop Macondo (also from the family that runs Las Tablas). Unfortunately, as soft and perfect as the empanadas are, the chicharron con arepas (pork rind with corn bread) is dry, cakey and brick-like, featuring bits of rubbery chich (I regard the cloud-like cider vinegar kissed ones at the Publican as the fried pork skin gold standard.) McCormick's patacones con carne asada, a trio of crispy, fried green plantain rolls stuffed with well-seasoned juicy steak bites tossed with swatches of bursting tomato and buttery sauteed onion are unambiguously stellar. It's like an open-faced burrito (a Chicago specialty sandwich that utilizes flattened fried green plantains in place of bread). La Parrilla also serves one of those too, and it's pretty good, but not nearly as delightfully garlic-perfumed as the original invented at La Botziques in Humboldt Park. And herein is one of the major problems with La Parrilla: the

question of authenticity. If you're a Colombian steakhouse, why serve a Chicago Puerto Rican invention, or a Cuban mojito, featuring fresh mint and a yowl lime, but filled with saccharinely sweet and fat American Sprite? Even the centerpiece grilled meat platters — which range from a grille and spotty connective tissue-riddled, well-done (they didn't ask what doneness I wanted) New York Strip from the churrasco plate, to more of that incredibly well-marinated and seasoned medium-well carne asada — aren't particularly distinctive. Though the cut of NY Strip from the churrasco plate I received on my second visit wasn't very good, it should be noted on my first visit the NY Strip was juicy and relatively free of connective tissue, though it was disappointingly still well-done. The chuleta de cerdo or fried pork chop (pounded ultra-thin) is a pork winner schinized by another name. Though it is cooked perfectly, it is also the width of a tiny aircraft carrier, and hereon sets in after



The delicious empanadas are rustic, corn pastry pockets fried and stuffed with braised meat and ricotta. | JOHN KIM - SUNTIMES PHOTOS

about five bites. Served with a lime wedge for spritzing, I really long for a palate-wetting sauce to break the monotony. I think about dipping the pork in the house oil hot sauce (cilantro, pepper, onion) or the chimichurri from the churrasco plates, but neither of these sauces are as pungent or vinegary as I'd like to warrant the effort. And while sides such as the fried

cooked, well-trimmed steaks, custardy blood sausage and beautiful grill-charred sweetbreads, I guess it's not authenticity or uniqueness that matters as much as great execution.) La Parrilla's flan, which they buy from an outside "flan lady" is executed brilliantly. Most flans jiggle like a 1960s Jello mold — goopy and loveless — so I've generally stopped ordering them. However, this flan lady's flan features smooth, almost cream-brulee-like custard rimmed with a rich, dripping, burnt molasses caramel. My only quibble of course is that flan was invented by the Romans (they served savory red flan and sweet flan) and popularized by the Spanish, hardly Colombian. But really it's kind of shameful to think about petty issues such as authenticity, with something that goes in your mouth.

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