



diningout

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The pescado (fish) taco — a crispy plank tossed with a nice fiery serrano pepper aioli — is off to a good start until topped with a bitter and too finely shredded rat's nest of cabbage at L' Patron, 2815 W. Diversey. | SCOTT STEWART-SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

LOST IN TRANSLATION

L' Patron lacks spice, vision

Like a Quentin Tarantino movie, my visit to the new Logan Square taqueria L' Patron started out charming, unfamiliar and quirky. But, unfortunately, also like a Tarantino movie, it ends in chaotic disaster.

There were high expectations. Owner/cook Ernesto Gonzales, who is cooking with his brother Cesar at L' Patron, is a Kendall college alum and a veteran of Rick Bayless' Michelin-starred gourmet regional Mexican restaurant Topolobampo.

And yet, even with such promise, I probably should have known better. A cartoonish sombrero-clad, mustachioed Pancho Villa-like dude wearing a vest of bullets, glared from the restaurant's window. The taqueria's exterior was painted like a Patron tequila box, an alarming shade of neon orange and green. The marquee itself was the exact same font as that of the upscale spirit. (You put odes to Patron up on the walls of your first bachelor pad or your fraternity game room, not the facade of your first restaurant.)

Then again, I'm getting ahead of myself. Walking inside on a cold snowy December night, bellying up inside the bright orange dining room, throwing your elbows down on the stainless steel counter and breathing in the heady perfume of cumin and lime at L' Patron is a warming affair; the exact opposite feeling conjured by the loud exterior.

Festive accordion, base and drum-heavy Norteno music

L' PATRON 1½★

2815 W. Diversey, (773) 252-6335;

Hours: Mon.-Thurs. and Sun. 10 a.m.-10 p.m.; Fri.-Sat. 10 a.m.-4 a.m.

Prices: Tacos: \$2-\$2.50; Tortas, The Gringa, Burritos: \$5-\$5.50; Sides: \$2-\$6

Try: The Gringa; house chunk salsa with chips.

In a bite: A high-end restaurant cook goes out on his own by serving up simple Mexican cooking, but something gets lost in the translation.

KEY: ★★★★★ Extraordinary; ★★★★★ Excellent; ★★ Very Good; ★ Good; Zero stars: Poor

oompah oompahs over the tinny house intercom. The woman working the counter is doting, quickly dispatching thick drafts of *horchata* (which is mostly decent except for a bubble gum/sanitizer aftertaste). She dips into the house *escabeche* (pickled spicy vegetables) and ladles out generous cupfuls to customers.

Behind her, the brothers Gonzalez don't wait around for orders by pushing around mountains of gray lifeless meat moldering in the corner of a flat-top grill like most taquerias. Befitting of Ernesto's time with Bayless, they cut and grill marinated meat to order. They wash and chop fresh lettuces and toast and griddle the buns for the tortas at the last second. They fry fresh tortillas in to crunchy, wispy dipping chips and pair them with tangy, limey pomegranate-studded chunky



The Gringa, L' Patron's signature tortilla filled with carne al pastor and melted Chihuahua cheese, is satisfying comfort food.

salsa. They grill freshly patted masa tortillas for their house special, a k a "The Gringa," a love child of the gooiest Chihuahua cheese-stuffed quesadilla and a spit-roasted al pastor taco filled with caramelized onion and drippy sweet pineapple. Even sober, this concoction is a nice gut-filling bit of comfort food.

Alas, that's the last of the magic here. The tortas are over-marinated, the thin ribbons of ribeye weep grease, and the airy torta bread sogs and crumbles under this deluge. Unlike the pastor meat in The Gringa, whose sweet-

ness is tempered by onion and cheese, the pastor meat in the taco is saccharine, a cloying candy bombed with pineapple juice lacquer. The *lengua*, or tongue taco, is braised well and tender, but tastes and looks like gray flavorless meat floss. Salt is nowhere to be found.

A lack of seasoning also does in the carne asada taco, whose meat, though uniformly brown, lacks the dark black charred bits of a truly righteous steak taco.

The *pescado* (fish) taco, in this case, tilapia — a crispy plank tossed with a nice fiery

serrano pepper aioli — would be perfect, if not for the bitter and too finely shredded rat's nest of cabbage.

The chorizo torta has a nice bit of cumin and oregano spice, but it needs a crispy element, for the tender fatty meat mixes with the sandwich condiments — avocado and mayo — and turns into a slimy, inedible mess that begs for some crunchy salvation.

And then there is the *elote*, an oversteamed, wilting hunk of corn on the cob drenched in sour cream, chili and what is dubbed "fresh crumbled cheese." That cheese tastes

more like the salty, dessicated Kraft green-can variety. The corn kernel cells have burst from the turgid pressure of far too much boiling water and the chili cream is a gloppy mess. The appeal of an elote, especially the ones you score from a cart in Humboldt Park or from a rolling vendor on the sidewalk in Bucktown, is certainly the salty cheesy riot to come. The elote at L' Patron is a not so much a delightful mess as a pigpen of grossness.

What's puzzling is how a cook who worked at a Michelin-starred restaurant can run such a bad restaurant



The guacamole at L' Patron restaurant features a sprinkling of fresh pomegranate seeds.



Fresh pico de gallo (salsa) is a limey, pomegranate-studded affair.

himself. The Gonzales duo are definitely trying hard. While they cook, they peer over the pass and scrutinize their diners. They ask constantly how their customers like things. And to the brothers' credit, (and also sort of confusingly), the patrons mostly nod their approval. But, the fact is, when confronted directly, most people are too nice to tell the truth to a cook's face.

One thing I notice the

brothers do not do is taste. Rarely do I see a spoon or fork come from the grill to make sure a piece of meat or vegetable is well seasoned. The brothers would be better off doing less talking and more tasting.

Michael Nagrant is a local free-lance writer. E-mail the Sun-Times Dining section at diningout@suntimes.com with questions and comments.