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Lafayette's Rancho Cantina Brings Diners Back to Culinary Roots

By A.K. Carroll



Photos A.K. Carroll

hospitality, if not from a staff member, then by one of the owners themselves.

Julie Mitchell and Erik Peterson have been mapping out the cantina for over two years. When early plans for a French restaurant fell through, they shifted their focus to something historically local. Mitchell herself is a seventh generation Californian, with a father and brother who both ranch cattle and another brother who farms, supplying many of the ingredients used in the cantina's dishes. They hired a seasoned consultant and veteran head designer, pulling in Jaliscan executive chef Jorge Hernandez (formerly of Left Bank) and veteran servers from Lake Chalet and other local restaurants, striving for quality at every corner.

"What we're doing isn't earth-shattering," said Peterson, "but it is new. What is Rancho? It's a culture, a heritage, a cuisine. This place is an homage to the rancheros and their contribution to California."

With its reclaimed Salinas Valley barn wood, leather-backed bar stools, Mexican tiling and big open windows, the upscale saloon is cozy, but polished - as suitable for date night as it is for a family meal. An open kitchen and visible wood-fired grill connect creator and consumer, eliminating traditional dining as tortillas flip before your eyes. Ample outdoor seating (and the promise of future heat lamps) invites you to come in for a drink and linger into the evening.

An old rancho saying, "It is better to arrive at the right time than it is to be invited," suggests that all are welcome to the Rancho table. This is reflected in the restaurant's long benches, spacious bar, and community-style seating, as well as its menu, which offers more small plates than it does entrees. On the whole, the selection is blissfully simple, with just over a dozen options ranging from Tostones de Papas Fritas, mashed and fried potato medallions with a tender interior encased in a crisp coating and served with fire-roasted salsa, to the Guisado de Carne y Nopal, a traditional rancho stew of tender slow-braised pork, soft strips of cactus, chunks of potato and California peppers, served with corn tortillas. It's one of Peterson's favorites.

The kitchen is still experimenting, offering a velvety fresh guacamole, garlic-herbed mission olives, fire-roasted and verde salsas, and a house-made hot sauce potent with haba♦eros. More familiar Mexican offerings, like the chicken enchiladas, sit side-by-side with crispy California fish

Before Moraga became home to Saint Mary's College or Orinda built Theatre Square, before the completion of the Caldecott Tunnel or the creation of Lafayette Community Park, the wild west of Lamorinda was divided into ranchos - tracts of land used to raise cattle, sheep and horses. Ranchos were places of arduous work and generous hospitality - and are the inspiration for the entrees and ambiance of Rancho Cantina, Lafayette's most recent dining destination.

Rancho Cantina takes Lamorindans back to the culinary roots of the region, blending the traditions, culture and recipes of Spanish conquistadors and Mexican rancheros, the original Californios, for an eating experience that is truly "autantico." Before you make it through the swinging wood gates or under the branding iron archway, you'll be greeted with a smile of hearty

tacos, beer-battered and fried, served with cabbage slaw and the same spicy aioli that brightens Rancho's grilled shrimp. Adobe Brick Chicken marinated in herbs and served with crunchy fennel slaw and a Meyer lemon crema provides food enough to share, though you might want it all for yourself. Entrees come with traditional rancho pink beans and rice, staple sides to flesh out a meal. The menu also offers \$5 options for "niños" and vegetarian alternatives, including a grilled asparagus salad and grilled portobello and poblano quesadillas.

In true Cantina style, the restaurant features a full bar (heavy on tequila) and a drink menu that includes local beers, imported bottles, a modest selection of wines and rancho-inspired cocktails, such as the Rancho Sour, made with Lunazul blanco tequila, house-made jalapeño syrup, fresh lime and pineapple juice, Herbsaint liqueur and an egg white and The Spicy Bandelero, made with Xicaru Mezcal, fresh lime, cilantro, jalapeño and agave.

Rancho Cantina celebrates the "golden days" of the rancho period - a time of fiestas and music, land wealth, laughter and leisure. Pull up a chair and have a seat at the table.

Rancho Cantina

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