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Specialties of the House: The Hunt for Happy Hour

By A.K. Carroll



Smokey margarita Photos A.K. Carroll

Welcome to the Hunt for Happy Hour, a new series in which we seek to bring you the freshest and finest when it comes to discounted beverages and premium small bites in the Lamorinda area. This week we visit Rancho Cantina, a neighborhood watering hole with a bit of class and lot of flavor.

After a long day on the ranch, in the office, or at home corralling the kids, every one could use a little time at the neighborhood cantina. The folks at Rancho are armed and ready to fix you up and send you off refreshed, relaxed, and ready for the evening. Running from 3 to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday, Happy Hour is available at the reclaimed wood and hand-tiled bar, in the rustic dining room, or out on the spacious patio where you can hide under big umbrellas or bask in the afternoon sun.

Discounted drinks include refreshingly simple house margaritas made with Luna azul blanco tequila, fresh-squeezed lime, Cointreau and agave nectar; prima margaritas kicked up a notch with Leyenda Del Milagro reposado and Gran Gala liqueur and tall drafts of Modelo beer. The happy hour repository is a bit limited, but the full drink menu leaves little to be desired, except perhaps for the off-menu mezcal margarita that will set me straight for the rest of my night.

There's plenty to tempt your taste buds where noshes and nibbles are concerned. From crispy

chips and salsa to generously composed ceviche featuring the fresh-caught fish of the day, the full array of antojitos (small plates) ring up at a 25 percent discount. You can't go wrong with good guacamole, and Rancho's is some of the best, made fresh throughout the day with big chunks of avocado and a solid dose of crushed garlic and minced red onion. Served alongside salsa roja and salsa verde, it's the ultimate in chips and dip. Or you might opt for the bite-sized pardon peppers, charred to crispy perfection and served with a chipotle crema that has just enough kick to get you licking your fingers (and possibly your plate).

You might come in for a quick one, but don't be surprised if you stay longer. Between the fresh and friendly waitstaff, accommodating bartenders, and Lamorinda locals, you're almost certain to find someone who's game for a good conversation. It's worth taking an afternoon detour to mosey on up and dust off the day at Rancho Cantina.

When: 3-5 pm, Monday-Friday

Where: 3616 Mt. Diablo Blvd., Lafayette

Drinks: \$4 Modelo, \$7 House Margarita, \$10 Prima Margarita

Food: \$3-8 Antojitos (small plates)

Recommended: Smokey Mezcal Margarita and Grilled Padron Peppers



Rockfish ceviche



Rockfish ceviche and grilled pardon peppers



Grilled pardon peppers

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