

REVIEW: CASA DE ORO **

Oregon cafe offers a few bright spots

Originally published in *The Blade* on Thursday, November 12, 2009

It's a rare Mexican restaurant that advertises pork chops on the sign out front. In the case of Casa de Oro, it's a not-so-subtle hint that it considers itself a bit of a hybrid.

The decor of this restaurant on Navarre Avenue in Oregon adds to the point. You can walk in and grab a seat by the festive, South-of-the-Border-style bar or slide into a booth near a photo of a race car and a TV with sports highlights playing in the background.

The menu puts an end to any argument. As the name suggests, the restaurant/cantina has a strong Mexican bent, but there's a whole part of the menu labeled "American Fare" that includes a fish sandwich and breaded shrimp. The House Specials category features ribs, fried chicken, and several steaks.

All of this means that there are myriad ways to approach a dining experience at Casa de Oro. Unfortunately, few of them stand out.

Doogie diablos (\$4.75 for six) sound like a fun way to begin a meal, and the fried mini-corn dogs actually are pretty good with just the right amount of crispness. Some of the other appetizers didn't fare as well, however. The cheese quesadilla (\$4.85) appeared to be nothing more than microwaved soft tortillas with a little shredded cheese in between, and the homemade guacamole (\$5.95) was bland and overly creamy.

The Mexican entrees, likewise, were a mixed bag. Chef Dan's special casa deluxe picada wet burrito (\$8.75) was a whopping combination of chunky beef, beans, and other goodies, and the ground burrito beef chimichanga (\$8.75) hit the spot.

On the other hand, I sometimes couldn't tell whether I was eating my beef burrito or my chicken enchilada as I tasted the El

Dano combination dinner (\$14.50), which also came with a tamale and taco; everything sort of seemed the same.

In too many cases, the ingredients were passable but uninspiring. The chicken fajitas (\$13.95), for example, featured chunks of chicken that lacked any zip and looked as if they'd just come out of a box.

As for Casa de Oro's margaritas, one member of our group found them refreshing while another compared them to a tepid, watered-down punch.

Off the American side of the menu, the beer battered pubhouse chicken tenderloin (\$6.50) was crispy, meaty, and tasty, although somehow the name gave me visions of gastronomic grandeur greater than the chicken tenders and fries that arrived at the table.

To the restaurant's credit, service was good and there always were prompt refills of drinks and chips when we needed them. Even better, Casa's Mexican xangos (\$4.95) - rich cheesecake rolled in a pastry tortilla, then deep fried and topped with whipped cream and cherries - was a good way to end a meal.

Casa de Oro

Address: 3111 Navarre Ave., Oregon.

Phone: 419-691-8700.

Category: Casual.

Menu: Mexican and American.

Hours: Noon to 9 p.m. Monday-Thursday, noon to 10 p.m. Friday, 3 to 10 p.m. Saturday. Reservations are accepted.

Wheelchair access: Yes.

Average price: \$\$

Credit cards: AE, Dis, MC, V

Web site: www.casadeororestaurant.com

Ratings: ***** Outstanding; **** Very good; *** Good; ** Fair; * Poor.

Meals are paid for by The Blade