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Dining Out

In Living Color

[West Allis' Antigua isn't your same-old, same-old Mexican joint.](#)

by [Ann Christenson](#) | Saturday 1/27/2007

It's warm in **Antigua**.

The walls, colored pumpkin and corn-yellow, are interrupted by windows, an occasional canvas and mirror. The tables are draped in white and dark-blue linen, and when the plates arrive, the colors multiply to include red and green. It's a beautiful attribute of Latin restaurants: They almost dare you to be gray.

One night, I jog through a damp rain from my parked car to the entrance. I'm warmed immediately. It's Thirsty Thursday, an event celebrated with half-price drinks and free appetizers. Servers bring a small plate with a complimentary nibble to start the meal – a mango-cheese quesadilla triangle and potato croquette with thin, peppery salsa (the same salsa comes with the freshly fried tortilla chips). It's a nice touch, although one night, the quesadilla isn't warm at all and, as I rip open the tortilla, the cheese isn't melted either.

If you decide the free little bites aren't enough, there's a range of apps to buy. It's here, with the menu, that you start to see how Latin this place is. Spain, Mexico, El Salvador and Puerto Rico all make an appearance. They won't keep you from a taco here or enchilada there, but the majority of the menu is creations like meat-filled empanaditas (small turnovers), fried plantains, tequila cream chicken and shrimp in coconut milk-peanut butter sauce.

Antigua Latin Restaurant, not exactly new, started out promising – just unluckily located. Owner Citlali Mendieta ran her restaurant briefly in a storefront on East Wisconsin Avenue. But with the blocks between Water and Jefferson deserted after 6 p.m., the space didn't stand much of a chance for dinner business. But Mendieta has some solid restaurant ancestry – her parents operate Rey Sol, the South Side Mexican restaurant that turned the definition of Mexican beyond sloppy beans and rice on a plate. Mendieta closed the Wisconsin Avenue location and, after some months, got things going in West Allis.

The festive, more modern Antigua serves several dishes for which its father restaurant, Rey Sol, is known. Chiles en nogada, for one – a pair of poblano peppers stuffed with pork, dried fruit and nuts and buried under a thick, cold walnut cream sauce. And Cochinita Pibil, a mound of shredded, slow-cooked pork that has the calming, mild effect of a beef stew or pot roast.

The food is like the interior – it looks fetching. But does it satisfy?

It can, and it does – but not always. I take great pleasure in the El Salvadoran popusas, two thin masa-dough pancakes filled (scantly) with cheese and pork and served with “curtido,” a crunchy cabbage slaw (\$6). But the fried plantains, sharing the plate with a ramekin of minced garlic, are so dry I can barely swallow them (\$5.50). For chicken soup, the caldito Xochitl doesn't need to be anything more than what it is – a good lime- and cilantro-flavored broth with rice, chicken, tomato and avocado (\$4 and \$6).

Behind every great man, there's a great someone else. Behind every Mexican entrée, there's rice and beans. Great rice and beans? Not usually. But they're the foundation of an entrée. Antigua beans are the standard refried (unless they're black beans, which come with the Cuban-style roasted pork, \$8), but the rice, seasoned liberally with cilantro, is moist and light, a nice balance for the spicy, heavy, creamy, chewy additions to the plate. Shrimp in an Ecuador-style sauce of peanut butter and coconut milk, with flecks of paprika, keeps the kaleidoscope of color turning, but it retains none of the sauce's flavor (\$14.50). The salmon in blackberry sauce is so far to the left of bland. The filet is buried under a purple blanket. Each bite is fruity, with the crunch of berry seeds (\$14). A bit overwhelming, but interesting.

The walnut cream sauce covering the Mexican dish chiles en nogada is sour and sweet, topped with (when in season) pomegranate seeds. It's a good complement for the mild, heavy stuffed peppers (\$14). The sauce is just assertive enough for this dish, but a plainness plagues the tequila cream chicken (\$12.50). The sauce on that dish is creamy, it's rich, but it has no dimension or discernible flavor. Not that every dish has to tread with fury across the taste buds. The shredded pork – Cochinita Pibil – is a homey, Yucatan-style dish without much fanfare. It doesn't need it. The pork is

marinated in achiote paste, which gives the meat its dark-orange color. Served in a tangle of red onion, the dish is like stew and barbecued beef and yet its it's own hearty thing (\$12.50).

Grilled pound cake with coconut and cream cheese-stuffed crepes are possible endings here (\$3.50-\$7), but I prefer the one they bring without charge – a shot of peach schnapps. It goes down more smoothly than custard or cake.

It would be easy to do just a menu of chimichangas and burritos. Antigua takes an inspired direction and dresses up the location, so it's easy to linger after settling the bill. Good for West Allis, good for us.

Antigua Latin Restaurant, 5823 W. Burnham St., 321-5775.

Hours: Mon-Thurs 11 a.m.-9 p.m.; Fri-Sat 11 a.m.-10 p.m.; Sun 3-9 p.m.

Prices: appetizers \$5-\$7; soups, salads, wraps \$4-\$7.50; entrées \$11-\$15; desserts \$3.50-\$7.

Service: young but attentive and friendly.

Dress: something colorful.

Nonsmoking.

Handicap Access: Call for help.

Credit cards: M V A DS.

Reservations: accepted.

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