

Dining With Pleasure

Jose's Grill in Wheaton is not simply for Latin fare

All beginnings are hard. While Jose's Grill awaits new signs, a fluttering white banner over the door announces its name; the side signs still read Thanh Thanh. Diners wander in, looking for the popular Vietnamese restaurant. They find the same handsome dark wood décor, Tiffany-style lamps and artwork. Yet the unfamiliar menu causes most of them to leave.

That's a pity. If they had stayed and given the newcomer a chance,

Dining Review

by M.J. Pleasure

they might have been pleasantly surprised.

Owner

Jose Cardenas, a Bolivian native, worked for 23 years at the District's Hay Adams Hotel, rising to restaurant captain. His chef Juan Herrera divides his time between serving as sous chef at the hotel and putting his imprint on Jose's kitchen.

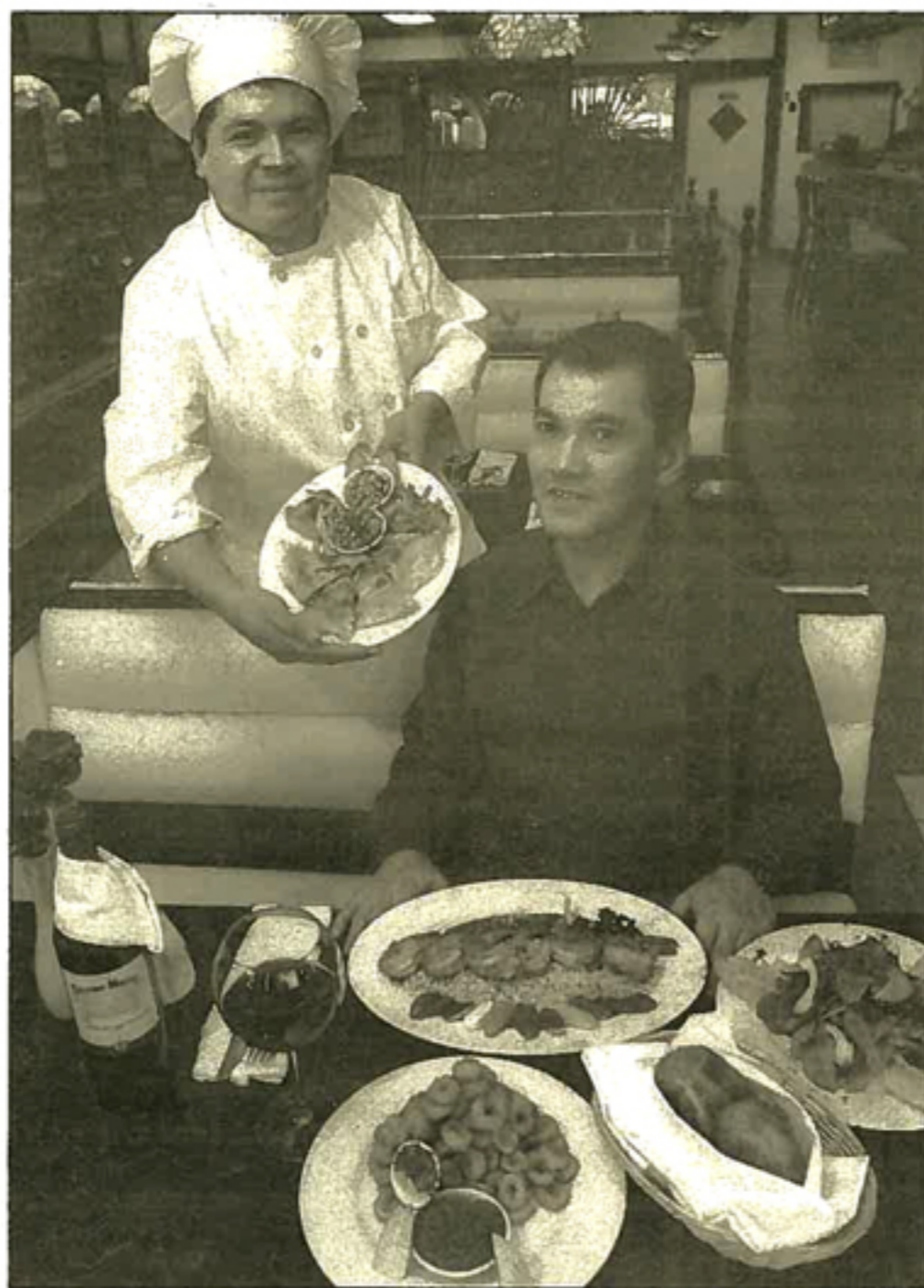
Although several dishes — sopa de res (oxtail soup with vegetables), quesadillas and fajitas, for example, bear the Latin stamp, the menu is wider ranging.

Pastas have an Italian accent, and steak takes a classy port wine sauce.

Selections are the same at lunch and dinner, with commensurate savings at lunch. Lunch specials are planned for the near future.

Seafood occupies a prominent place among the appetizers: flounder, shrimp and scallop ceviche marinated in lemon juice, shrimp cocktail, fried calamari and camarones al ajillo.

Judging by the handling of the



Susan Whitney-Wilkerson / The Gazette

Chef Juan Herrera of Wheaton (left) presents chicken quesadillas while owner Jose Cardenas of Olney displays (clockwise from bottom left) fried calamari, shrimp scampi and a garden salad at Jose's Grill in Wheaton.

shrimp in our entrées, this shrimp in garlic butter should be a good bet.

For a land-based treat, the chicken quesadilla is outstanding. Delicious tomato bisque, the soup

of the day, offers a surprise: pieces of chicken at the bottom of the bowl. Warm, crispy mini-baguettes arrive in a covered basket.

An array of 10 entrées plus a special, wiener schnitzel this evening, allows the kitchen to concentrate on doing a few things well.

Shrimp is shown to good advantage in dishes such as shrimp scampi, served with basmati rice and seasonal vegetables (broccoli, carrots and zucchini), and black tiger shrimp presented over linguine primavera in a tomato chive sauce.

But the shrimp fajitas take the prize, colossal gems on a sizzling platter of onions and peppers with a side serving of guacamole in a lettuce cup and salsa.

The beef fajitas are equally inviting. Another meaty dish, Jose's special, for two people, includes grilled beef short ribs, imported sausages and chicken breast, served with rice and salad for \$18.

Sometimes you win by default. The kitchen is out of sea trout, offering red snapper instead. The fish is treated with respect, sautéed in olive oil and served with rice and vegetables. Its natural flavor shines through without an intrusive sauce.

Other possibilities include fettuccine Alfredo with shrimp or chicken and a couple of entrée-sized salads: chicken caesar and Cobb, that intriguing combination of romaine, turkey, avocado, egg, tomato, bacon, blue cheese and Thousand Island dressing.

Steak and cheese, chicken salad and club sandwiches as well as

Jose's Grill

11423 Georgia Ave., Wheaton

Hours: Tuesday-Saturday 11 a.m.-1:30 a.m. Sunday 11 a.m.-midnight

Entrée prices: \$12.50-\$16.25

Credit cards: All major cards

Reservations, carryout: 301-962-3530

No smoking, accessible

beef or chicken tacos are available.

For youngsters, there's macaroni and cheese, chicken tenders or hamburger.

Save room for dessert. Top on the list is the chocolate trifle, a light and moist confection presented with a scoop of rich ice cream, sliced strawberries and whipped cream on a plate decorated with chocolate sauce. The bread pudding, buoyed up by light custard, is a pleasant reminder that this dessert does not have to be heavy. Jose's Grill serves flan, or in the international lexicon, crème caramel, that holds its own.

There's parking in front of the restaurant, on the side street (Hickerson Drive) and in the public lot between Blueridge Avenue and Hickerson Drive. The meters end at 6 p.m.

Cardenas plans to add live music on weekends and free tango classes. Hopefully, Jose's Grill will develop as loyal a following as its predecessor.