

Border Grill: Mexican food elevated to OMG! status

Larry Olmsted, Special for USA TODAY 12:48 p.m. EST February 5, 2015

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(Photo: Larry Olmsted for USA TODAY)

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The scene: Border Grill is the kind of low-key neighborhood eatery you wish was in your neighborhood, because you would eat there all the time. It made celebrity chefs out of its owners long before celebrity chefs were the norm, and put authentic Mexican regional cuisine on the map before there was an emphasis on authentic or regional. In so many ways Border Grill has been way ahead of the curve – including its sourcing of sustainable and natural ingredients – yet it remains largely out of the limelight because at its heart, it is still that unpretentious neighborhood spot. The food does the talking.

Its four full-service locations (there's a fifth counter-style one in Los Angeles International Airport) all have a similar look, feel and comfortable contemporary cantina vibe. They are essentially Latinized pubs with colorful murals and paintings on the walls, ceilings and even the plates. Everything from the glassware to staff uniforms is tied into the look, a sort of Day of the Dead meets Frida Kahlo Mexican-style imagery, with lots of color. A welcoming bar is a centerpiece, while the restaurants are filled with closely spaced wooden tables, chairs and a lively conversational buzz. It's a fun and whimsical atmosphere, and while you are immediately drawn in, it's not the kind of place you might expect to serve fabulous and extremely well-thought-out food. But it does.

Chef owners Mary Sue Milliken and Susan Feniger were working in a fancy French restaurant when they tried the delicious down-home cooking of the Mexican kitchen staff, like nothing they had ever tasted. Intrigued, they packed up a VW Beetle and headed south of the border on an extended eating trip. They took the tastes and ingredients they discovered, paired these with their formal culinary education, and opened Los Angeles' Border Grill in 1985. Five years later they moved it to nearby Santa Monica, where it remains an integral part of the landscape, the original local pub vibe intact. They became known as the "Too Hot Tamales," and had one of the first hit shows on the nascent Food Network in the '90s by that title, along with numerous cookbooks. The pair opened a second location in the Mandalay Bay Resort in Las Vegas, one in downtown L.A., and just a few months ago, the latest in the Forum Shops at Caesars Palace in Vegas. I've eaten at the original, the newest and Mandalay, and the quality of food and service is amazingly consistent.



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Reason to visit: Guacamole, margaritas, pescado Veracruzano, chile-rubbed ribeye – and just about everything else!

The food: The menu is broad, including gourmet takes on simple Mexican dishes such as tacos, nachos, flautas, enchiladas and quesadillas, along with main dishes featuring steak, chicken and pork. There is a substantial focus on seafood, and Milliken and Feniger are actively involved in the Monterey Bay Aquarium's sustainability programs, so while the fishes used change regularly, all are responsibly caught. There is a ceviche bar, raw shellfish, whole fried fish Veracruz-style, and in general a lot more aquatic options than the typical Mexican eatery.



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The thing that makes Border Grill so good is the ingredients and preparation. Everything is meticulously sourced, and even the most basic staples of Mexican cuisine, the rice and beans, are organic. Meat is all humanely processed, antibiotic- and hormone-free, and most of produce is grown locally. But while many restaurants today are sourcing better, Border Grill goes a step further in how from-scratch everything is. Even its excellent margaritas and signature cocktails are built from the ground up – all the juices, including pineapple, are pressed on-site from whole fruit. Order a blood orange jalapeno margarita and not only is the juice made here, but so is the chile pepper and salt rub lining the rim, from drying to grinding. Guacamole is hand-pressed batch by batch throughout the day, and is the best I have ever tasted, incredibly rich and creamy but amazingly light, almost ethereal. Excellent homemade tortilla chips are likewise light but crunchy and delicious, served with a trio of salsas, one green tomatillo and two reds of varying spiciness, not only homemade but from house-roasted peppers, giving them a delicious smokiness.

The bottom line is that the attention to detail is amazing and it comes through in the food, so uniformly good it is impossible to go wrong. On top of that, the dishes themselves are creative and interesting – instead of beef enchiladas you have braised short rib enchiladas. The Yucatan pork is slow-braised wrapped in banana leaves, served with house-pickled onions and caramelized plantains, something you don't see every day. Now ubiquitous, Caesar salad is actually a Mexican invention from Tijuana, and their homage is made with kale, topped with "croutons" of fried Mexican cotija cheese, and dressed with crunchy garlic slivers, like nothing you have ever had.

The signature dishes at Border Grill include the plantain empanadas, guacamole, green corn tamales and quinoa fritters, and all are wonderful. The latter is another ultra-original that Feniger created when she competed on *Top Chef* and was required to make a dish that didn't need silverware: they are crunchy, cheesy and delicious, but also wholesome. The whole fried fish (snapper on my last visit) is incredible.



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But the thing that really rocked my world was the chile-rubbed ribeye, served with purple Peruvian potatoes and a medley of roasted chiles, garlic and shallot. They source their beef from Colorado's Aspen Ridge ranch, and while this is a fairly casual Mexican restaurant, the steak is better than what you will get at the majority of the nation's most acclaimed steakhouses at any price. It is simply fantastic, among the best steaks I have ever had, and I've had a LOT of premium beef. If you love steak, this is the kind of dish worth planning a trip around, and while it is the most expensive thing on the menu, at under \$40 with all the delicious sides it's a bargain compared to just about any upscale steakhouse. Prices are higher than typically mediocre Mexican eateries, yet reasonable compared to most sit-down restaurants, especially since the food is exquisite. Service is excellent as well, and if you don't care for beef, that's fine, because you just can't go wrong here.

Pilgrimage-worthy?: Yes – the chile-rubbed ribeye is off the charts and everything else is great too.

Rating: OMG! (Scale: Blah, OK, Mmmm, Yum!, OMG!)

Price: \$\$-\$\$\$ (cheap, \$\$ moderate, \$\$\$ expensive)

Details: Original, 1445 4th Street, Santa Monica; 310-451-1655; bordergrill.com. Other locations include downtown L.A., LAX, and in Mandalay Bay and Caesars Palace in Las Vegas.

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Larry Olmsted has been writing about food and travel for more than 15 years. An avid eater and cook, he has attended cooking classes in Italy, judged a barbecue contest and once dined with Julia Child. Follow him on Twitter, @TravelFoodGuy, and if there's a unique American eatery you think he should visit, send him an e-mail at travel@usatoday.com. Some of the venues reviewed by this column provided complimentary services.

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