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There's more to Rojo than tacos, burritos

BY SYLVIA RECTOR • FREE PRESS RESTAURANT CRITIC • DECEMBER 4, 2008

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Before you decide to be skeptical of a Mexican restaurant founded by executives of an Italian dining group, you should hear the story behind the upscale Rojo Mexican Bistro in Novi.

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It began with managing partner Daniel Linnen's frequent vacations to Mexico -- and the disappointment he felt back home when he couldn't find the exciting, authentic Mexican flavors he enjoyed there.

He would talk about it with Andiamo executive chef Luis Garza, and Garza would take pity on him and cook him something wonderful.

"Luis would make this great food. It was unbelievably good," says Linnen, owner-operator of the Novi Andiamo, where Garza was chef.

You can predict what happened next: Linnen went to Andiamo founder and CEO Joe Vicari and said, "We've got to do a Mexican restaurant."

After more than a year and a half of concept and recipe development, Vicari, Linnen and Garza opened Rojo -- pronounced ROW-ho -- a couple weeks ago.

Garza's menu includes classic burritos, enchiladas, tacos and fajitas, but it stands out by also featuring dozens of dishes with more sophisticated, contemporary twists. Many feature higher-end ingredients such as steak, jumbo shrimp, lobster and fresh fish.

There's even a mushroom quesadilla that includes huitlacoche (wheet-la-KO-chay) -- the corn fungus that is Mexico's answer to the truffle.

Rojo's 110 kinds of tequila represent the largest selection in metro Detroit, Linnen says. The restaurant's 11 signature margaritas are made with fresh lime juice and sweetened with natural agave nectar.

Garza, 42, a native of Linares in northeastern Mexico, has been with Andiamo for 15 years as an executive chef in both Dearborn and Novi. His kitchen makes everything in-house except for the flour tortillas and *tres leches* cake he buys from his favorite Mexicantown purveyors.

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Sylvia Rector column index



A massive table found in the Whitney's carriage house is now used for private dinner parties.

(PATRICIA BECK/Detroit Free Press)



Photos by ERIC SEALS/Detroit Free Press

ABOVE: Luis Garza's menu at the new Rojo Mexican Bistro features higher-end ingredients like steak, jumbo shrimp, lobster and fresh fish.

It's too soon for a full review, and I've visited only once. But I enjoyed both dishes I tried: a flavorful cream of poblano pepper soup (\$3.99) and the strikingly presented camarones rellenos - firm, fresh-tasting jumbo shrimp with lobster cream sauce, strips of roasted fresh poblanos, seasonal vegetables and chef's potatoes (\$19.99).

It's a promising option for diners looking for an interesting new venue to try during the holidays.

Set near Fountain Walk's Great Indoors home store, the restaurant is at 44375 Twelve Mile. Reservations recommended. 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Monday-Wednesday, 11 a.m.-11 p.m. Thursday, 11 a.m.-midnight Friday, noon-midnight Saturday and noon-9 p.m. Sunday. 248-374-4600. www.rojomexicanbistro.com.

Cool table at the Whitney

The Whitney has a new feature for guests looking for a memorable holiday dining event.

It's a prix fixe chef's table dinner party for up to 10 -- held around an antique table that's a conversation piece in itself.

The massive carved table was discovered this year in the Whitney's carriage house. It was covered with a cloth and piled with "all kinds of stuff" for untold years, says restaurant co-owner Patrick Liebler.

"We said, 'My Lord, what a beautiful table!' ... But it's a mystery to all of us," he says.

No one knows who made it or where it might have been used in the mansion, but it's now installed in original owner David Whitney's study.

The chef's table menu features six courses with paired wines and some "hidden courses" for \$125 per person, including tax and gratuity. Chef Michael Lutz will come to the table to discuss each course.

There's no fee for the room, and valet parking and coat check are free for chef's table guests. Only one group per night will be scheduled to assure guests a leisurely dinner. Reservations required. 4421 Woodward, Detroit. 313-832-5700 and www.thewhitney.com.

Go Victorian in Holly

The Historic Holly Hotel's Victorian feast, first held in 1979, returns this year on successive Monday nights, Dec. 15 and 22. The five-course menu includes roasted parsnip and chestnut soup, roasted Christmas goose with brussels sprouts and English bread pudding with toffee brandy sauce. The cost is \$39 per person (\$31 for hotel dining-club members). Reservations are required.

Several other Christmas-themed events are also scheduled at the festively decorated restaurant in Holly, about 50 miles northwest of downtown Detroit. 248-634-5208. www.hollyhotel.com.

Morton's offer: \$49.50

Marking its 30th anniversary this year, Morton's the Steakhouse is featuring four-course, \$49.50 dinners through Dec. 28. Guests may choose one of two salads, a single-cut filet mignon, one of three seafood dishes and one of two desserts. Three wines are also available at \$39 per bottle.

From 5 to 6 p.m. Dec. 21, guests can enjoy free mini-cheeseburgers in the bar.

For reservations, call the Southfield Morton's at 248-354-6006 or the Troy location at 248-404-9845.

Mediterranean in Auburn Hills

Palm Palace restaurant group has opened its second location, a 200-seat restaurant in Auburn Hills at 2065 N. Squirrel.

The first was in Clinton Township in the space previously occupied by the now-closed La Shish chain. Palm Palace executive chef Jamil Eid was La Shish's executive chef for 18 years.



TOP: After more than a year and a half of concept and recipe development, Rojo opened in Novi a couple of weeks ago.

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Besides its regular menu of Greek, Middle Eastern and Moroccan dishes, it's featuring a Walima menu, designed and priced for groups of four to six or eight to 10. In the Mediterranean, the term "Walima" originally referred to a wedding feast but has come to mean any family or celebratory gathering, says Palm Palace spokesman Clinton Hamet. 248-371-9000. www.palmpalace.com.

www.laserspineinstitute.com

Beer at Haandi

Diners who enjoy the flavorful dishes at Haandi Cuisine of India can now order leading brands of Indian beer with their meals, says owner Rakesh Sabharwal. Indian wine will be available soon.

The intimate, white-tablecloth restaurant recently received its liquor license, allowing it to offer full bar service. Sabharwal hopes the addition of alcoholic beverages will help the restaurant compete more effectively in a difficult economy. 37116 Six Mile, Livonia. 734-432-2088.

www.haandimichigan.com.

A few quick bites

- The Detroit Wine Organization's December tasting is 6-8 p.m. Monday at award-winning Tribute in Farmington Hills. Reservations are required. Admission of \$55 (\$50 for organization members) includes light hors d'oeuvres. A limited number of dinner reservations are available afterward with a 20% discount for guests. For reservations, details and tasting list, see www.detroitwine.org.
- The Lark in West Bloomfield is the top-rated restaurant in Michigan in Zagat Survey's new 2009 edition. The survey rankings are compiled using votes and comments of guests who have dined at the restaurant.
- CiCi's Pizza -- home of the unlimited, bargain-priced pizza buffet -- has opened in Roseville at 32456 Gratiot, north of Masonic. The buffet features a wide variety of traditional as well as specialty pizzas, along with soups and salads. Adults pay \$4.99; children 10 and younger pay \$2.99. 586-296-9400.

Have restaurant news? Contact **SYLVIA RECTOR** at 313-222-5026 or rector@freepress.com.

In your voice

READ REACTIONS TO THIS STORY



REALMEX wrote:

We ventured to Rojo Mexican Bistro last Saturday night. We had an 8pm reservation and still waited 25 minutes for a table. We ordered margaritas in the bar while we waited. The margaritas were VERY small portions, not much tequila and were very overpriced. We decided to try a couple of shots. The shots were more stingy than the margaritas!

Our server told us we would be "waiting all night" for tableside guacamole, so we ordered it from the kitchen. The guacamole cost \$9 and again we were very disappointed with the portion size. The COST of chips and salsa (yes you must pay for them) is \$5. The chips were good, the salsa was tasteless. We ordered chicken fajitas and tacos. The chicken was tasteless. The fajitas came with chicken in the skillet pan and tortillas. There was no cheese, sour cream, lettuce, tomatoes, etc for the fajitas! The tacos were supposed to be shredded chicken. It was the same tasteless chicken as the fajitas!

VERY Disappointing experience!
12/04/2008 10:15:59 a.m. EDT

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