

# Fiesta Garibaldi's festive Mexican cuisine

By Tristan McGough  
*Special to the Lakes Edition*

"Every day is Cinco de Mayo at Fiesta Garibaldi," says Jose Rebollar, the intense dynamo behind the exceptional taste sensations served on plate or by glass at this festive restaurant specializing in authentic Mexican cuisine right in the heart of Johnson Creek.

However, today — May 5, 2017 — is when Cinco de Mayo is actually celebrated, and Rebollar wanted this roving reporter to stop roving and stay at his restaurant long enough on this early spring evening to watch the way Mexican culture and cuisine are celebrated on this important day, which serves as a Mexican-American tradition that has gone nationwide (see sidebar).

And sure enough, it doesn't take long after the 5 p.m. benchmark that seems to divide the afternoon from the evening — the dinner-tide, if you like — for patrons to roll in from remote areas as well as nearby neighborhoods.

Billed as being "conveniently located just beyond the western Milwaukee suburbs, or an easy ride from Madison" arrives as not just a slogan, but a fact.

Someone who just arrives is Jesse Owens. He and his wife reside in Brookfield, just on the western slope of the Greater Milwaukee Metropolitan Area, and he confides, "We get here a few times a year; it's our favorite Mexican restaurant and I don't mind taking an easy-enough trip just down the freeway for authentic Mexican."

We go on to talk about the food, but Owens points me toward his drink in the making. It's a custom-crafted Margarita. I don't know what else to call it as we watch master restaurateur Rebollar mixing a concoction of South-of-the-Border tequila, exotic liqueurs and flavorful botanicals.

Jose is in his element. Though he is a master when designing the plethora of culinary delights at the restaurant, and though he is a gracious and often humorous host, and though he is the grand orchestrator of the buzzing wait-staff surrounding guests as they arrive for dinner, Rebollar takes on a Zen demeanor when mixing a Margarita.

Sometimes vision seems to blur as the master mixer reaches overhead for a glass while adroitly, almost unconsciously, grabbing a bottle behind him, dipping in salt, spinning to the bar to pour

sparkling tequila out of an oversized magnum, and then octopus-like splashing in this ingredient and that until the large glasses are filled to their salty brims.

Owens leans my way, "Even though I don't come here as often as I'd like, Jose knows who I am and makes me something special every time." He winks, "It makes me feel special." The magnificent concoctions are placed in front of the Owens party (who asked to remain unphotographed while reveling), and Linda Owens takes the first sip.

She ejects, "This is delicious! It's so smooth..." She sips again, "I can't even taste the liquor."

Jesse chimes in with a comic's twist, "This could be dangerous! It goes down too easy!"

Rebollar has been serving guests his proprietary recipes at Fiesta Garibaldi since Dec. 9, 2001, many passed-down across generations and delicately refined to accommodate new combinations for the sophisticated palate of the modern food aficionado, exposed to a multi-cultural spectrum of palatable options, many conveniently available.

This Friday, the public is now flowing into Fiesta Garibaldi's festive atmosphere, some deciding to luxuriate in the sunshine on the outdoor patio, but most coming into the brilliantly painted interiors framed with warm wood. And flow it does, off the interstate, from throughout the vicinity, and by one repeat customer after another repeat customer.

Is it to celebrate Cinco de Mayo? Of course it is, both as the holiday and the experience. At Fiesta Garibaldi, authentic Mexican is celebrated every day.

Rebollar tells the growing group of patrons at the bar, which is adjacent to the restaurant but designed as its own alcove, "We have specials every day."

Rapidly he repeats a familiar formula, "Monday is all you can eat crab legs. Tuesday, all you can eat shrimp. Wednesday, all you can eat tacos. Thursday, all you can eat crab legs again. And Friday we have an all you can eat fish fry."

In other words, no one goes away hungry from Fiesta Garibaldi. Though there are carry-outs, people come and stay for the pleasant ambience and excitement of being part of a rich cultural experience, with brightly themed walls of colorful scenarios brought to life through vivid hues and dazzling

contrasts.

Fiesta Garibaldi boasts that its extensive menu has a taste and the necessary variety to satisfy any appetite.

Starting one's taste experience with appetizers, there's a lot to tempt the palate, including tamales, quesadillas and traditional sopes, plus the customary guacamole and chips. To illustrate, sopes is an authentic Mexican snack characterized by its distinctive pinched-up rim holding the savory fillings. Order the sopes and you get three with refried beans, chicken, steak, ground beef, pork and shredded beef, topped with lettuce, tomatoes, sour cream and cheese.

A favorite with diners is the Fiesta Garibaldi Combo, which is served with buffalo wings, shrimp, quesadilla, flauta, beans, guacamole, sour cream, cheese sauce and chips. If shrimp is your preference, try the Coctel De Camaron, which is plump shrimp served in a light tomato sauce and garnished with crisp onion, cilantro, tomatoes and slices of fresh avocado.

But one mustn't neglect to at least consider the soups made fresh every day, such as Sopa Marina, a delicately balanced seafood soup comprised of shrimp, crab legs, octopus, crab and fish. Additionally there are other mouthwatering soups, such as Caldo de Pescado, which features fish soup made with fresh vegetables, potato celery, carrots and green peas.

And then there are salads of all sorts — grilled chicken salad; Garibaldi's Salad; garden salad topped with green peppers, mushrooms, tomatoes, onions and black olives; Caesar; Greek and taco. A salad for every season of taste.

Someone coming by for lunch will find all sorts of specials, even cheeseburgers with fries and other American favorites, ordered off the adult side of the menu or off the kids' side. A full section of the menu is devoted to seafood specials that include red snapper, oysters, shrimp, crab and other deep sea catches.

For example, the Huachinango A La Veracruzana is a whole red snapper topped with a mild veracruzana tomato sauce. Or one can try the Camarones Empanizados, which is Butterfly shrimp breaded with proprietary secret spices and served with Spanish rice and salad. Seafood fajitas always have generous portions of seafood sautéed with slices of onions, tomatoes, and green and red peppers and is served with a special fajita sauce that Rebollar says many people relish.

However, most people who come to Fiesta Garibaldi are looking for their Mexican favorites, such as Enchiladas Rojas, which has three rolled up corn tortillas stuffed with chicken, steak, pork, ground beef, shredded beef or cheese.

"We top it," Rebollar explains, "with our home-



There are plenty of smiles as well as fine food at Fiesta Garibaldi. (Photo submitted by Tristan McGough)

made sauce, melted cheese and sour cream."

He goes on to describe Flautas De Deshebrada O Pollo. "This is very popular in Mexico. We use flute shaped tacos and stuff them with your choice of shredded chicken or beef, then garnish with sour cream and guacamole."

Many a patron loves the variety and contrast available in the El Trio Combination Dinner, where customers are offered one tamale, one chile relleno (stuffed green pepper) and one taco, with many choices for filling, whether ground beef, chicken, pork, shredded beef, beef tongue or steak.

But to go the full nine yards at Fiesta Garibaldi is to order a traditional Mexican dinner. There are so many to choose from and the problem, of course, is having too many wonderful, tantalizing choices.

Order a Zamora and you get a choice of a tender skirt steak or grilled chicken breast cooked to your taste specifications and topped with an exclusive, original frijoles de la olla in arbol sauce. The meal is served with two quesadillas and guacamole.

There is the Bistec A La Mexicana, which is a specialty dish consisting of chopped ribeye steak, simmered in a mild ranchero sauce along with jalapeno peppers and onions.

Any vegetarian would delight in ordering the Chiles Rellenos De Queso. These are two large ripe poblano peppers stuffed with warm cheese, egg battered and pan-fried in a delicious mild ranchera sauce.

And, naturally, there are Fiesta Garibaldi's renowned fajitas, where generous portions of skirt steak or tender chicken breast are sautéed with slices of onions, tomatoes and green peppers and served with a side order of guacamole.

And though they have Spanish names, there are well-recognized taste favorites hiding around every corner of the menu, such as Pollo Con Mole Poblano, which is a savory choice of tender pieces of chicken simmered in Rebollar's delicious and unique mole sauce; or the Bistec Encebollado, featuring a delectable steak served with grilled onions; or, perhaps, the Puerco En Salsa Verde that is made of tender chunks of pork loin served with green tomatillo sauce, again with corn or flour tortillas.

Then, for discerning connoisseurs, there is the Lengua En Salsa Verde, which is beef tongue served with green tomatillo sauce and corn or flour tortillas. Or, maybe, Arroz Con Pulpo Y Camaron, where octopus and shrimp are mixed with fluffy rice and topped with

cheese.

Whatever your preference for appetizers, drinks, and dinner, you won't want to forget dessert, which balances the salty, sour and savory of a meal with a sweetness that caps the dining experience.

"Our desserts change, like our menu," Rebollar says. "We are always looking for ways to give our customers a new taste treat." Mexican cuisine, like any ethnic set of recipes, relies on traditional ingredients and proportions, but combination is subject to alteration. Perhaps it's a matter of knowing what to keep and what to change, and when to do it or not.

Fiesta Garibaldi knows what its patrons want and expect and what they might be delighted by that's new, different and, if lucky, perhaps better than what's been offered before.

Jesse and Lindo Owens, still raving about their meal, have finished and are moving toward the door, past the many cheerful patrons queuing up for a culinary encounter well worth the drive and effort.

Jose waives a "good-bye," knowing that they, like so many others he's served in the past, will be back down the road for another authentic Mexican dining experience from which memories are made and compliments passed-on to others.

## The tradition of Cinco de Mayo

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In America, Cinco de Mayo ranks right up there with St. Patrick's Day and, particularly in our corner of the country, Syttende Mai.

However did you know that the famed Mexican holiday is, really, not much celebrated in its native land at all. Rather, Cinco de Mayo — which is Spanish for "Fifth of May" — has become a holiday that's mainly celebrated by Mexican-Americans as they have re-defined their heritage within an American context.

According to the UCLA Center for the Study of Latino Health and Culture, the modern American focus on that day of Cinco de Mayo begins in the United States in California during the 1860s.

Back then, when Mexican workers in America heard of compatriots in their own country resisting French rule, they were inspired to celebrate. The date is observed to commemorate the Mexican Army's unlikely victory over French forces at the Battle of Puebla, on May 5, 1862, under the leadership of General Ignacio Zaragoza.

"Far up in the gold country town of Columbia (now Columbia State Park), Mexican miners were so overjoyed at the news that they spontaneously fired off rifle shots and fireworks, sang patriotic songs and made impromptu speeches," according to David E. Hayes-Bautista in "Cinco de Mayo: The Real Story."

A 2007 UCLA Newsroom article entitled, "American observation of Cinco de Mayo started in California," notes that, "the holiday, which has been celebrated in California, continuously since 1863, is virtually ignored in Mexico."

TIME magazine reported on May 5, 2010, "Happy Cinco de Mayo," that "Cinco de Mayo started to come into vogue in 1940s America during the rise of the Chicano Movement." The holiday expanded from California into the rest of the United States in the 1950s and 1960s but it didn't gain in popularity until the 1980s when marketers, especially beer companies, capitalized on the celebratory nature of the day and began to promote it in tandem with Mexican culture, first in areas with large Mexican-American populations, like Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston and San Jose.

In a 1998 study in the Journal of American Culture it was reported that there were more than 120 official U.S. celebrations of Cinco de Mayo in 21 different states. An update in 2006 found that the number of official Cinco de Mayo events was 150 or more, according to José Alamillo, a professor of ethnic studies at Washington State University in Pullman, who has studied the cultural impact of Cinco de Mayo north of the border.

Los Angeles' "Fiesta Broadway" has been billed as the largest Cinco de Mayo celebration in the world, attracting crowds of 500,000 or more.



Wherever you wish to be served — in the restaurant or at the bar — your meal will be delectably hot in more ways than one. (Photo submitted by Tristan McGough)