

# Mexico via Mississauga

## Cantina Mexicana

☆☆☆

**LOCATION:** 277 Queen St. S.  
(between Britannia Rd. W. and  
Eglinton Ave. W.), Mississauga,  
905-813-1992.

cantinamexicana.com

**HOURS:** Tuesday to Thursday  
noon to 10 p.m., Friday and Sat-  
urday noon to 11 p.m., Sunday  
noon to 9:30 p.m.

**CREDIT CARDS:** American Ex-  
press, MasterCard, Visa

**NOISE:** Soft music and conversa-  
tion, TV turned low

**TAKEOUT:** Yes

**DELIVERY:** No

**WHEELCHAIR ACCESS:** Yes

**FIRST IMPRESSIONS:** Are we in Mississauga or Michoacán? If you could block out the prim Streetsville setting, you might think you'd been teleported to a sun-baked town somewhere south of the Rio Grande. The building's exterior pulsates with hot pink and tropical green trim. Inside Cantina Mexicana, there are more bright colours, plus terra cotta tile floors, hand-painted tables — and Mexican shows on the television suspended from the ceiling.

At first we think, "Oh no, TV dinner à la Mexicana." But as we take in the bright colours, sexy clothes and *caliente* soap-opera scenes on the satellite network (the volume is turned down), we



BY K EHLINTON/TORONTO STAR

Maria Filanowski and her daughter Juliette welcome adventurous diners to Cantina Mexicana.

realize that *la tele* adds a certain Latino piquancy to the atmosphere. If channels were rated for spiciness, this one would get three chillis.

Owner Maria Filanowski, a 63-year-old native of Tampico on the Mexican gulf coast, welcomes you into the cozy, softly lit place. She and her husband, an accountant and jazz saxophonist named Julian Filanowski, started Cantina six years ago, with daughter Juliette, now 26 and a student working part-time as a server and manager. Maria and her brother share responsibility for cooking.

Sadly, Julian died of a sudden heart attack in January. The grieving Maria soldiers on, maintaining the restaurant's commitment to authentic Mexican food, including homemade salsas, tortilla chips and mole. Cantina's menu even features fresh nopales, or cactus.

That such a place exists in Mississauga is, to this Mexico-phile, a small *milagro* — a miracle.

**ON THE PLATE:** We're immediately won over by the guacamole. Served in a sandstone mortar, with the pestle standing in the middle, buttressed by the guac, this is green perfection, the fruit ripe and creamy, with undertones of garlic, cilantro, onion and lime.

It's worth trying the "nopales del norte" (\$8). The cooked cactus paddles taste a bit like green beans but have the texture of

## Resto

PATRICIA HLUCHY

zucchini. These are refreshing with their sprightly tomatillo sauce.

The tilapia ceviche (\$9.50) is unexciting. There are also five sautéed shrimp appetizers (\$13.95 for four shrimp with bread, and \$20 for a dinner portion). Feeling invincible one night, we order them "a la Diabla," even though Maria warns that habañero peppers make this very hot. It is breathtakingly spicy, but we savour the rich, tomato-based sauce, even though the shrimp have toughened a bit from overcooking.

Cantina has a range of tortillas, tacos and enchiladas, some more typically Mexican than others. For those who prefer North American-style Mexican, the burritos are still vastly superior to standard Canadian Mex. We love the spicy filling of the chicken burrito (\$11).

The more authentic and substantial mains come with rice, salad and refried beans. Chicken mole (\$15.50) features a breast topped in a concoction including dozens of spices, cocoa, almonds and 16 dried peppers.

Another standout is the chili relleno (\$15), which we have with beef. This breaded and baked poblano pepper can also be ordered stuffed with chicken, chorizo sausage, shark meat or vegetables.

Pollo con rajas (\$15.50) consists of pieces of chicken breast in a delectable sauce of cream, strips of nutty, slightly hot poblano pepper and corn. The chicken, though, was dried out from overcooking.

Tinga poblana (\$15.50) is zippy shredded pork with chipotles and tomatoes.

Desserts, at \$6.95, include a fun Mexican take on baked Alaska — vanilla ice cream covered in flour, sugar and cinnamon, and deep-fried.

It's commendable that Cantina uses fresh lime juice, not cordial, for its frozen lime margarita (\$6.95 small, \$9.95 large), but I found the slushed-ice drink a bit too sweet.

**AT YOUR SERVICE:** Maria and her servers are friendly and attentive, checking in on diners regularly.

**SECOND HELPINGS:** Cantina's one brilliant invention is the Mexican perogy. Julian Filanowski had wanted to add something from his Polish background to the menu. After disastrous experiments, daughter Juliette suggested perogies filled with spicy chorizo sausage. It was a stroke of culinary genius. These perogies (\$5.95 for six) are a revelation. The light, comfort-foodish flour shell and lively filling, made with sausage from a Latino Kensington Market butcher, complement each other beautifully.

**TAKE A PASS:** Perhaps it was an off night, but we found the Carne Tampiquena (\$15.50), a grilled flank steak, to be tough and tasteless.

**EXTRAS:** Vegetarians and vegans should find enough options here. A child's dinner with drink and ice cream dessert is \$7. A fireplace is lit in winter, and there's a large patio for warm days and nights. Cantina offers catering and hosts special events. There's live Latin music, with the occasional mariachi band, on Saturday nights.

**PRICE RANGE:** Appetizers \$3 to \$13.95, soups and salads \$5.50 to \$9, mains \$10 to \$37.

**BOTTOM LINE:** A warm family atmosphere and good, authentic Mexican food make Cantina Mexicana a gem.

Stars are awarded for food, service and atmosphere. Reviews are based on two anonymous visits that are paid for by the Star.

- ★★★★ Outstanding
- ★★★★ Excellent
- ★★★ Very good
- ★★ Good
- ★ Fair
- ★ Poor
- ★ Awful