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Pull into La Estacion for fine meal

*DENNIS R. GETTO Journal Sentinel **restaurant** critic*

"Your next stop is Chicago," the host told us as he handed us menus.

We knew we weren't going anywhere, even if our seats were aboard a railroad car. Instead of a train ride, we were looking forward to a more stationary experience -- a special house dinner that included meat, chicken and potatoes seared and served on a Mexican grill with peppers and small crunchy onions.

Called a parrillada dinner (\$15.34 for one person, \$25.30 for two), it was one of several dishes that distinguished **La Estacion** in Waukesha as one of the better Mexican **restaurants** in southeastern Wisconsin.

La Estacion means "the station" in Spanish and is the new name for the train-station-turned-**restaurant** that had been called The Depot for the past two decades.

During those 20 years, that depot and the train cars behind it were home to a barbecue **restaurant**, an upscale place operated by a local caterer and, most recently, a Chinese **restaurant**.

Current owner Tony Marquez (who owned the Jalisco **restaurant** in Waukesha) remodeled the **restaurant** and renamed it in 2003. He also closed Jalisco. (It's now a clothing store.) The face lift Marquez gave the old depot fits its Mexican menu, which has somewhat unusual prices. The reason, Marquez explained was that when he moved from Jalisco to **La Estacion**, he raised prices 10% across the board. The odd prices, such as \$4.51 for a burrito with Swiss cheese or \$8.52 for steak in hot chile sauce, were the result of that increase.

Doors are painted in the pastel turquoise and coral often seen on buildings in Mexico and the Southwest. The walls of the main dining room have been painted to resemble Mexican adobe, and two glass cases set into the wall display a collection of Mexican religious art. An elaborate wall sculpture of the sun, with an Aztec motif, hangs high on the wall.

It was on a Sunday evening that I became interested in that parrillada dinner. A friend and I were seated in the main dining room a few tables away from a Mexican family who had ordered a parrillada dinner of their own.

Mounds of meat..The father, mother and four boys all sat around one of the traditional square grills on which parrillada is served. We watched as mom stood up, tongs in hand, and placed pieces of grilled beef, pork, sausage, chicken, onions and pepper on small plates that she passed to dad and the boys. That sizzling mound of meats looked so good that I knew I'd have to order it on my next visit.

"That's a lot of meat for just the two of you," our server said when I ordered it a few days later. We paused for a moment to reconsider. Then my friend and I told him we'd take any leftovers home.

He wasn't kidding about the portion. Despite the fact that it was described as a dinner for two, this easily could have fed four. The flat Mexican steel grill was piled high with beef ribs cut into thin, steak-like slices with small bones left in; strips of skirt steak; chopped pork; chicken; and spicy Mexican chorizo (a sausage made with chile and cloves).

Between the mounds of meat lay slices of cooked potato, grilled banana peppers and small spring onions. On the side were Spanish rice; pink beans that had been cooked, mashed to a paste and sprinkled with shredded Mexican cheese; guacamole; pico de gallo (a chunky salsa made of tomatoes, onions, bell peppers and cilantro); and a round plastic server filled with both flour and corn tortillas.

All we had to do was decide how we filled each tortilla. Some similar dishes My favorite approach was steak and ribs (I removed the bones first,) topped with crunchy grilled green onions and a little guacamole. The blue flame beneath the grill flickered as my friend and I chatted over a leisurely dinner. When we were done, our server filled a take-home box with meat, potatoes and tortillas. There was more than enough for a generous lunch the next day. While that grilled meal was good, it wasn't unique to **La Estacion**. Many other Mexican **restaurants** around town offer versions of the dish. But the combination of the dish and the train car atmosphere made the experience especially pleasant.

In fact, many of the same dishes that can be found in the chain of Jalisco **restaurants** around southeastern Wisconsin appear on **La Estacion's** menu. Because I wanted to see how this **restaurant** differed from its competition, I avoided common items such as tacos and enchiladas and tried dishes that looked out of the ordinary. I found three that were especially good. Steak Zamora (\$9.07) was a pretty standard marinated and grilled skirt steak, but the beans served beside it really distinguished it. Instead of the standard pale pink mashed frijoles, these were frijoles charros -- cowboy beans that brimmed with the flavors of the pork and chiles that had been cooked with them. These excellent beans were served in a side dish (with a cheese quesadilla on the side), but I used them as a tasty topping for my skirt steak.

Delightfully mild Then there were **La Estacion's** chiles rellenos (\$8.52 for cheese filling, \$9.07 for ground beef). When made correctly, chiles rellenos are delightfully light. Each Poblano pepper is first seeded, then toasted, filled (usually with cheese) and then dipped in an egg batter and fried golden brown. To finish the dish, most Mexican chefs bathe the peppers in a thin tomato sauce.

La Estacion chefs skip that final step. The result is a freshly fried, delightfully mild-tasting fritter. And instead of just offering the chiles filled with cheese -- as is done in most other Mexican **restaurants** -- this **restaurant** makes ground beef versions available as well.

When we couldn't decide which to order, our waiter suggested we try one of each (\$9.07). We alternated bites of the robust, meat-filled peppers (seasoned with garlic and onions) and the milder, cheese-filled variety.

Thin charcoal-grilled skirt steaks also appear on **La Estacion's** menu. Charcoal grilling steak is common in northern Mexico. So is eating cactus paddles, called nopales. The steak dish I tried (\$9.84) combined flavorful beef with crunchy cactus to create a slightly tart taste and delightful clash of textures.

Other dishes, including shrimp quesadillas (\$7.15), guacamole (\$5.77) and flautas (tortillas rolled around a filling of steak or chicken and deep-fried, \$7.97), were all a little better than average.

As for dessert, even though the vanilla flan (\$3.30) had been made in the **restaurant's** kitchen, I wasn't impressed. Far better was Pastel de Tres Leches (\$3.75), a moist, rich cake made with evaporated, condensed and whole milk, sugar, vanilla and rum. Service was thorough, prompt and professional, though we found ourselves waiting a little too long for our checks and change on two of our three visits.

LA ESTACION

319 Williams St., Waukesha

(262) 521-1986

Credit Cards: Discover, MasterCard and Visa

Hours: 9 a.m.-11 p.m. Sunday-Thursday; 9 a.m.-midnight Friday-Saturday.

Prices: Breakfast \$3.30-\$5.77; lunch and dinner \$1.65-\$16.22

Handicapped access: Yes

No smoking section: Yes

Children's menu: Yes

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