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Restaurant Review
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Chino Bandido diners get best of Chinese, Mexican Worlds

Your average combination plate. We're talking enchilada, tostada and taco, right? Two flautas, rice and beans?

Now—think again. Concentrate. Open your mind to all the cross-cultural possibilities in the food universe.

How about a chile relleno, egg foo yung, jerk chicken, fried rice and black beans, all on the same plate?

Are we in heaven?

No, merely Moon Valley.

Chino Bandido Takee-Outee is a Chinese-Mexican joint with Caribbean nuances where almost anything is possible. The only limitation, they say, is your imagination.

The small, casual eatery seats about 35. The décor is simple: black-and-white checked floor, a white wall speckled with black, an open kitchen. In addition to two booths near the takeout counter, there are black vinyl-covered tables in an adjoining section where, on busy days, it's a good bet you'll sit with strangers.

But that's OK.

This is one of the most genuinely friendly operations I've encountered in the Valley. The staff looks out for "first-timers." They'll make recommendations, give samples, teach you the ordering procedure.

Even the regular customers get into the act. Everybody's goal, it seems, is to educate "new guys" and make them feel a part of the club. After three visits, I guess I qualify.

For Openers, grab a pen

So, here's how it's done.

Orders are taken at the counter or can be phoned in. Grab a pen and one of the long, printed order forms, check off what you want, and fill in the your name at the bottom. When your food is ready, they'll call you.

The menu/order form is broken into two major categories: rice bowls, that's one item with rice, and combinations, that's two items with steamed (or fried) rice and black (or refried) beans, Plus quesadillas, burros, sour-cream chicken enchiladas and side dishes.

What's special about the menu is its "design-it-yourself" aspect.

In addition to the seven listed combinations, you can combine any two items of your choice. Or dictate your own quesadilla. Ditto for the burro. Maybe egg foo yung wrapped in a flour tortilla catches your fancy.

Daylong 'pig-out'

What makes me happier than all this variety is the quality of Chino Bandido's food. It's innovative, fresh, interesting and fun. If I lived nearby and had a different job, I'd be in here twice a week. Minimum.

I'm spoiled on my first visit. Chino Bandido is holding a daylong "pig-out" with all-you-can-eat jerk pork, jade red wings, black-bean tostadas, rice and beans for \$5.95.

I adore the black-bean tostada, probably because they seem so genuinely human, so homemade; most whole black beans gently smeared on crisp corn tortilla, topped with just enough melted cheese, lettuce, tomato and onion. Sadly, they are not a regular menu offering.

Regular black beans, cooked and mashed to a refried consistency, are, however. They are dark and delicious but not Cuban—at least not strictly.

Carnitas are different from what most Arizonans are accustomed to. Instead of pan-fried morsels, the pork is shredded until it resembles machaca nestled with bits of chile.

If crisp pork nuggets are what you desire, try the Jenred pork, bathed in a sweet-and-sour red sauce.

Multi-ethnic eatery feeds imagination

Never the norm

Chino's translucent flour tortillas, made on the premises, resemble Chinese moo-shu pancakes.

It's no surprise, then, that a green chile beef burro is also out of the norm. Rather than chunks of meat and green chile suspended in glutinous gravy, the chili in this small burro is a pink minced mixture. I don't love it.

The fried rice is terrific, in particular, the spicy jerk chicken and sweet barbecue pork versions.

The veggie quesadilla enfolded with lettuce, tomato, onions, broccoli and peppers, is a standout.

Complimentary dark chocolate or vanilla “Snickerdoodle” cookies are yummy. I also like the smooth and deeply cinnamoned arroz con leche “Johnlee” pudding.