

DINING OUT

Authentic MEXICAN CUISINE lies north of the border

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True or false? You have to travel to the Southwest for authentic Mexican cuisine. Definitely false, compadre, especially when it comes to Camelia's Authentic Mexican Cuisine in Farmington Hills.

"We are actually more Tex-Mex," said owner Camelia Flores. "The reason we say 'authentic Mexican' is because all of our foods are made from scratch."

Mexican or Tex-Mex, the food at Camelia's is authentically delicious. The taco shells are parchment-paper crisp, the rice flavorful, and the refried beans taste nothing like the mush you get in cans. They're wonderfully "beany" with a savory bacon flavor. Need to know more? The salsa, which is made every morning and allowed to blend several hours in refrigerator, is chock-full of fresh cilantro.

"People have asked me if I would jar the salsa and sell it in a market. I think I'd have to put vinegar in it to preserve it, and I don't want to do that," said Flores. Some people judge a Mexican restaurant by its tortilla chips. Camelia's homemade chips rate high.

"We always made them at home," said Flores. "I said I'm going to try these here. Now I couldn't go back. People love them. We have one person back in the kitchen deep-frying all day."

Opened just eight months, Camelia's is a family affair, with everyone involved — husband Tony, son Greg, and Flores' mother, Dominga Garcia, who taught Flores how to cook.

"Now I'm teaching my granddaughters how to cook," said Garcia. "I learned from another Dominga, my father's mother. She was born in Mexico."

Menu

Camelia's is small and com-



Family and friends: Camelia's staff includes: Camelia and Tony Flores, Maria Flores, Lisa Perez, and Rosemary Tuttle.

fortable, and the large front window lets in lots of sunshine. Colorful ponchos and paintings add just enough accent to the off-white walls. However, it's difficult to miss the huge framed photograph of Flores' father in the entranceway. There, in all his glory, is 17-year-old Jesus Garcia, fighting a bull. Besides being a matador, Jesus was a cliff diver in Acapulco.

"He was very brave," said Flores. Quite an understatement. While you don't have to be brave to eat at Camelia's, the

salsa is not for timid taste buds. Otherwise, order all the tacos, burritos and enchiladas you want and rest assured your heart burn will remain south of the border.

"I always tell people who come here for the first time to get the combination plate for variety," said Flores. "But my favorite is the Enchilada Suizas or the Camarones Rancheros. That's whole shrimp, and they're pretty good size, in our homemade ranchero sauce."

Flores' son, Greg, who plays in

a Mexican band and can sometimes be heard singing from the kitchen, recommends the Milanesa Dinner — steak or chicken breaded in special Mexican seasonings and topped with melted cheese and avocado. But then, everything tastes good at Camelia's, he said.

I took Flores' advice and ordered the combination plate — one flauta, chalupa and quesadilla with lots of rice and refried beans. Delicious. My dining companion ordered the taco salad. She loved the shredded



Olé: Camelia's combination plate is a favorite: one taco, tostada, enchilada and tamale along with homemade refried beans and guacamole. The salsa, chips and tortillas also are homemade.

Camelia's Authentic Mexican Cuisine

Where: 30701 West 12 Mile Road (in the Regency Plaza, just east of Orchard Lake), Farmington Hills, (248) 474-0902.

Atmosphere: Small (seats 75), uncluttered, pleasant.

Menu: Appetizers, salads, dinners, and daily specials. Average dinner prices, \$7.50 to \$11. Lunch specials, \$5.99.

Hours: 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday-Thursday; 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Friday; noon to 10 p.m. Saturday; 1 p.m. to 8 p.m. Sunday.

Extras: No smoking, take-out, catering and lots of friendliness.

chicken and claimed the taco shell bowl definitely was not the hard, flower pot variety served in other Mexican restaurants.

"And the cheese is white," she exclaimed. "When you go to Mexico there is no orange cheese."

Catering

Flores doesn't do large-scale catering, but she does make up "fiesta trays." Each tray contains 100 items — 20 each of tamales, hard tacos, soft tacos, enchiladas and burritos. The trays, which also come with rice, beans, four large bags of chips and two large containers of

salsa, cost \$250. "It's a real hot seller for baby showers and graduations," said Flores.

Flores hopes lots of people visit Camelia's on Sunday, May 5 in honor of Cinco de Mayo, which celebrates Mexico's victory over the French during the Battle of Puebla in 1862. She plans to have live entertainment, special give-aways, virgin Margaritas and daiquiris (they have no liquor license), as well as run specials on steak fajitas.

But don't wait until May 5 to visit Camelia's. Stop by anytime. A bowl of tortilla chips and salsa will be waiting.

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