

Sizzlin' Caliente

Lime Fresh Mexican Grill

601 SW 145th Ter., Pembroke Pines. Open daily from 11:30 a.m. till 9:30 p.m., till 10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Call 954-436-4700.

Zona Fresca Fresh Mexican Grill

1095 S. University Dr., Plantation. Open daily from 11 a.m. till 9 p.m., till 10 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Call 954-370-3332.

BY JOHN LINN

Mexican food is the fastest-growing trend in ethnic cuisine in America, probably for no other reason than the popularity of the Mexican grill. These days, you can't say "Pass the salsa" without an attendant from Chipotle or Baja Fresh chirping in, "Rojo o verde?" And did we mention On the Border, La Salsa, Moe's, Qdoba, or Tijuana Flats? These chains have all been quick to expand, opening franchises and buying up swaths of land in area development deals as if to answer the collective demand of progressive diners everywhere: "Vamoose, goopy beans-and-cheese-and-lard-smothered Tex-Mex! You're not wanted here anymore!"

In place of the heavy, fatty Mexican food that's been popularized over the past 30 years, these Mexican grills come boasting healthy choices, fresh ingredients, quick service, and limitless salsa bars. You might say the move is a step toward authenticity, another more overarching trend in the marketplace. But competition is so fierce that the only company guaranteed to come out on top is the one manufacturing those little plastic salsa cups with the snap-on tops.

But that's not dissuading John Kunkel, chef/founder/CEO of Miami's own Lime Fresh Mexican Grill, a fledgling chain of restaurants that six months ago launched its third store, this one in Pembroke Pines. Kunkel opened his first Lime in South Beach in 2004 after stumbling across an unlikely location for his business at the time, Taste Bakery Café. The idea for a Mexican grill had been rattling around in his head for a long time, he says. Kunkel's a self-professed Mexican food junkie as well as an inveterate restaurant lifer.

Talk to Kunkel about his work, and you can feel his passion. Though he's the head of operations for a multi-unit franchise, the guy still lives in the trenches, working hands-on with franchisees and overseeing every aspect of the business, from the menus to the patented drink koozies sold at the counter. He's also eminently personable, the kind of dude you'd love to share a beer and a burrito with — or buy them from, at any rate.

The new Pembroke location, the first in Broward County, is in a shopping mall of like-minded businesses — midsized chains like RA Sushi, Stir Crazy, and the Pub, all of which feel hipper than the lumbering chains of old. Coupled with the manufactured mall environs, you

get the feeling that Lime, with its blaring pop music and attractive blend of copper countertops and rustic, red brick, is almost *too* hip. But the polish is intentional. Lime's goal — to one-up full-service eateries by offering quicker food from better ingredients — is off to a fast start. Another franchise location will open this fall in Coconut Creek, and there are plans for a restaurant near the University of Miami. By next year, Kunkel hopes to be opening about ten stores per year for the foreseeable future.

Lime's menu is long for a quick-food concept, though it never strays too far from the Mexican grill norm. There are half a dozen appetizers, four salads, three soups, and a myriad of quesadillas, burritos, and tacos. But the numbers are padded by the fact that each item is a variation on the dozen

Dish

Two hometown Mexican eateries vie for the hot spot on the grill

who's visited a Mexican grill before, no doubt creating a more attractive profit margin.

It's also the reason you may have a tough time distinguishing the Lime burrito — with meat, beans, cheese, sour cream, and lettuce — from the Big Cali burrito — with meat, beans, cheese, sour cream, and rice. Sure, the Big Cali is bigger. But the nearly identical list of ingredients makes any other differences not immediately apparent.

Dishes each come with slim, crisp tortilla chips, perfect for scooping up any of Lime's six salsas. Each is made in-house daily — from the smoky, charred *asada* to the tomatillo-based *verde* — though the salsa *suave* is far and away the best and most original of the bunch. Kunkel says the stuff was actually a creation of one of his original prep cooks.



Joe Rocco

or so main ingredients. If you like Lime's marinated chicken, which it grills throughout the day, or its guacamole, a garlicky mash made with ripe Hass avocados, then you'll probably like whatever they appear in.

Nearly everything comes with an option of chicken or spicy, *picadillo*-like ground beef, or — for a little extra — grilled steak, fish (usually mahi, though it's seasonal), or shrimp. It's a practice that will be familiar to anyone

vision of edging out the sitdowns is viable.

Start with something like Lime's flautas (\$5.99), cigar-like tubes of fried tortilla hugging a mince of chicken, corn, beans, and cheese. You've had these before, probably from a box in the back of your freezer, but this is an instance in which Lime's freshly prepared ingredients make the difference. The same philosophy powers Lime's take on jalapeño poppers (\$4.99), though to less impressive results.

Much of what's on the menu is designed to attract those with a healthy appetite — or a guilty conscience. For instance, if you're watching your belt line while simultane-

What you get is surprisingly smoky and silky, with an addictive quality that's hard to control if only because it tastes great on nearly everything.

ously craving an ass-expanding burrito (a bit of a riddle, wrapped in an enigma), then the South Beach, with a choice of meat, low-fat cheese, *pico de gallo*, lettuce, and a low-carb tortilla (\$7.99) is your Huckleberry. I'm the sort of self-hating overindulger who is more apt to try the vegetarian burrito first (\$6.99). This one lets rice and refried beans do the heavy lifting, adding Lime's guacamole, sautéed onions and green bell peppers, sour cream, and a sprinkling of shredded jack and cheddar cheeses as accents. It's a good burrito but nothing to build a diet upon. Ditto the Lime (\$6.99), which seems chock-full of more shredded iceberg lettuce than anything else. (Ah, shredded iceberg. It's the nitrogen of the food world — all around us wherever we go, but does anybody really care?)

Tacos, available in hard corn or soft flour varieties (alas, no soft corn tortillas here), also fall prey to the dreaded iceberg trap. My original (\$3) was loaded with the stuff, but thankfully, the open-faced nature allowed me to brush off what I didn't want clouding up the flavors.

Fed up with the lettuce, I ordered a platter of fajitas (\$9.99) in the hope that I could craft my own hit. What I got was a combination of steak and chicken, fanned out in thin strips on a sizzling platter alongside peppers, onions, and the usual host of fajita accompaniments. I also opted for multigrain tortillas and an addition of guacamole, bringing the price tag to \$12.49, about what you'd expect to pay in any full-service haunt. The multigrain tortillas packed a subtle flavor and a more toothy bite — but, guys, if you're gunning to be the Healthy Grill, these should be offered as an option on any dish for free. As for the rest of the fajitas, the combination of pregrilled meat and heated skillet left many of the thin strips overcooked and dry by the time I got to them.

Lime would do well to keep an eye out for another of its competitors, the Fort Lauderdale-based chain Zona Fresca Fresh Mexican Grill. There are plenty of similarities between the two ventures: Like Lime, Zona is also in the infancy of its expansion stage, having recently opened a second location, in Plantation. Both are chef-driven. Both use only fresh, raw ingredients that require extensive prepping. But un- >>p.32

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like Lime, Zona has eschewed the franchise route, opting to move slower and focus on consistency before cultivating an image.

Tim Dobravolskis and Oscar De Armas, two childhood pals who came to Florida by way of California, opened the flagship Zona in 2001. Dobravolskis, a longtime restaurateur who's spent most of his career in white tablecloth dining, is the food guy. He refers to his menu as a rendition of the authentic, simple food he enjoyed on his many stays in the coastal areas of western Mexico.

Does the new store hold up to the high standard? Emphatically, yes.

New Times first reviewed Zona back in 2001, just weeks after its Fort Lauderdale location opened. We loved it back then, praising its crunchy/supple/savory/sour fish tacos, its reasonable prices, and its monumental return on investment (read: Portions are *huge*). The praise continued two months ago, when we named its habanero salsa the best in two counties in our Best of 2008 issue. To ensure that quality doesn't peter out, Dobravolskis and De Armas sent their head chef, who's been with the company since day one, to open the Plantation location. Does the new store hold up to the high standard?

Emphatically, yes. The fish taco (\$2.75) is still the best around. We'll let you debate whether an inch-thick wedge of white fish, batter-fried and put to bed inside two soft corn tortillas along with crisp cabbage, *pico de gallo*, and a smattering of tangy sour cream sauce flecked with cilantro, is authentic Mex. We frankly don't care. It's delicious. Same goes for the taco with marinated, grilled shrimp (\$2.65); you rarely get shellfish cooked this perfectly at even the best restaurants.

Zona's burritos are remarkable too. The veggie (\$5.50) is filled with grilled poblanos, yellow peppers, onions, beans, guac, sour cream, and roasted corn so fresh that it clings together as if still on the cob. The siesta maker (\$7.50) doesn't disappoint either: It took me two sittings to get through this beast, though I admit I did get it "enchilada style" — a covering of light and crisp tomato-ancho sauce for just 99 cents extra.

Although the health benefits of diet burritos are questionable, you can't deny the salutary qualities of the garden chicken salad (\$7.25). Shreds of romaine are blanketed with juicy, grilled chicken, salty cojita cheese, tomatoes, huge wedges of creamy avocado, and more of that delicious roasted corn. The dressing is essentially just olive oil and lemon juice. *Perfecto*.

The salsa? It's still here, though on my first visit, it didn't quite sing the way it usually does. Two return trips proved that was an aberration. Thankfully, Dobravolskis and company are still taking their time with it, marinating and grilling the tomatoes, onions, and peppers each day. It's a process he calls "rather laborious." Slow, yes. But it's a course that fits Zona snugly.

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