



Mojarra a la Diabla.

## Pearl on the plaza

**Come for the chips and salsa, stay for the atmosphere**

**M**y first trip to La Perla Taqueria Mexican Grill was late at night, half an hour before it closed, and all I ordered was chips and salsa and a 32-ounce bomber of Pacifico. I've been half a dozen times since and even if I'd never tasted any of the restaurant's other

story and photo by  
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**La Perla  
Taqueria  
Mexican Grill**  
450 Broadway  
487-7075

Hours: Open 8:30  
a.m.-10 p.m. (until  
11 p.m. Fridays and  
Saturdays)

fine menu options, I would go back just for the tortilla chips. They are delicately crispy and a little greasy, and are kept in a big stainless-steel self-serve warmer (refills are free) next to a cold bar stocked with a nice assortment of salsas and pickled vegetables.

Washing down the salt and spices with a cold beer and sitting among the other diners winding down at the end of a long day made for a memorable scene. During subsequent visits, the welcoming atmosphere has sold me on La Perla as much as anything else.

The restaurant opened last September in the spot where (the excellent and under-appreciated) Enjoy Teriyaki used to be, and the place has been completely revamped. The new owners opened the space up with exposed ceilings, polished concrete floors and, best of all, they removed the giant posters that had been pasted to all the windows, letting in wonderful natural light.

Whenever I've visited—during lunch and dinner time—the place has been packed with an eclectic mix of people. With a variety of traditional and popular Mexican music on the sound system, and sports on TVs around the dining room, the taqueria is lively and social and a great fit for downtown.

As for the food, the menu is enormous and wide-ranging, featuring everything from taqueria staples (tacos, burritos, enchiladas) to breakfast items (chilaquiles, huevos rancheros, etc.), to mixed seafood

cocktails (with octopus and shrimp). La Perla features an impressive selection of meats, with lengua (beef tongue), buche (pork stomach) and tripe in addition to the standards, and also offers fresh-squeezed orange and carrot juices, as well as wine, beer, wine margaritas and beer micheladas.

The standouts for me so far have been the pork tacos—both pastor and carnitas—and the Mojarra a la Diabla (spicy tilapia). The street-style tacos with choice of meat, salsa, onions and cilantro on grilled corn tortillas are \$1.99 each. The carnitas was especially tasty (though fairly salty), shredded and refried yet still tender.

Mojarra plates are \$12.99 (other options include plain, with garlic, and with grilled vegetables) and come with rice, refried beans, avocado, tomatoes and tortillas. The diabla option gets a healthy dose of mildly spicy tomato sauce ladled over the top of a whole fried tilapia. The skin on my fish was crisped nicely and the boney flesh was tender and enhanced greatly by the sauce and accompanying citrus—lime and orange slices—which brightened the flavor of the otherwise plain meat.

The whole-fish plates are probably the most eye-catching items, but La Perla's kitchen is obviously focused on presentation across the menu. Seafood cocktails come out in enormous clear goblets and all of the various plates and combos (ranging from \$10.99 to \$12.99) are impressive in their bountifulness.

Other items I've tried include the chile relleno (with an incredible creamy red sauce), crunchy tacos (with meat, lettuce, cheese and pico de gallo) that weren't as good as the soft, and the Alambre plate with carne asada, chorizo, grilled veggies and, best of all, a couple of mini cheese quesadillas.

My only complaint is that the beef has been inconsistent—just flavorless carne asada on a couple of occasions. I'll probably wait a while before I try beef there again. In the meantime, bring on the carnitas ... and the chips and salsa! □



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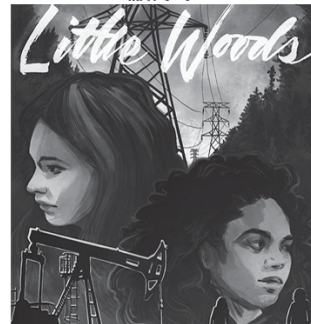
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