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FOOD

BY TODD SOUTH



Carlillos Cocina serves Mexican breakfast and lunch classics like these *chilaquiles* with *carne asada* and green sauce.

PHOTO/ALLISON YOUNG

## A little spice

**For decades, an eight-stool diner on South Virginia Street** in what is now midtown served up American diner fare, including a chili cheese omelet with home fries I still compare all else against. At some point in the late '80s, new owners decided to build two more locations, and then bit off more than they could chew. The largest location eventually settled into being The Cup (breakfast/lunch), and the original is now Beefy's, a decent little burger stop. But the last shop to use the Landrum's name eventually became something really special—and frankly amazing.

Carlillos Cocina retains the classic layout, with perhaps 18 stools at the counter and a few more in each corner of the room. The place gets pretty busy, but the family crew behind the counter moves things along at a rapid pace. Watching them perform the “kitchen dance” plate after plate is kind of mesmerizing. Still a breakfast/lunch operation, the biscuits and pancakes have been replaced by some of the best Mexican food you'll find anywhere.

The menu includes *tortas*, burritos, fajitas, tacos and salads, but I had one thing in mind. *Chilaquiles* (\$8.99) is a traditional breakfast of fried tortilla chips that are then simmered with salsa until they soften. There are many varieties, but my plate included mixed-in scrambled eggs, lots of melted cheese and fantastic salsa *verde (rojo* also available). For an extra \$2 they added a pile of tender, cubed *carne asada*, and I decided to try the breakfast potatoes. Wow. The seasoning and crispy/fluffy spuds were a surprise—really good even without the sauce. A simple salad on the side included dollops of fresh, flavorful guacamole, sour cream and a whole roasted jalapeño. The

*asada* was finished with fresh cilantro, bell pepper, onion and purple cabbage, adding a nice bit of crunch. It wasn't just a meal, it was an experience.

My friend chose a combo plate (\$11.99) with a shredded beef tamale, chicken enchilada and a *carne asada* taco that was folded and grilled. The plate included all the same veggies and extras as mine, though with rice and refried beans. As with the potatoes, I would have been happy with just those well-seasoned sides as a meal. She noted that she loves that peas and carrots are included in the rice, just like her mother did in New Mexico. The tamale was of particular note, with a perfect ratio of *masa*-to-filling.

Always on the quest for a good stuffed pepper, I added a *chile relleno* (\$4.50) and shrimp taco (\$3.50) to our order, *à la carte*. I was a little surprised that they were served on the same plate, dressed out with the same great collection of veggies, etc. The taco was served “street style,” not crispy, with plenty of grilled seafood. The *relleno* was really good, easily earning a place on my personal “best of” list—lots of cheese, better-than-average sauce and a chile with great flavor.

The plates are really loaded. I certainly wasn't the only one requesting a to-go carton. Having been open just a few years, it's easy to see why they've gained recognition far beyond Reno. The old Landrum's sign is still in place, perhaps as a nod to the past. I ate at that diner back in the day, but I was never so excited to have leftovers to look forward to. □

## Carlillos Cocina

415 S. Rock Blvd., Sparks, 351-1274

Carlillos Cocina is open Monday through Friday from 7 a.m. to 2 p.m. and Saturday from 7 a.m. to 1 p.m.