



OFF MENU

Food for thought

BY MITCH BARBER

"I love it. I love it." This was Marvin Gomez' response when I asked him how he felt about customers from other cultures partaking in his restaurant's ethnic cuisine. Marvin runs the Las Palmas Pupusería on Stockton Boulevard with his brother Sal Gomez.

It was an inspiring affirmation from a Sacramentan originally from El Salvador. If the United States is still the melting pot of the world, Sacramento is certainly one of its main ingredients. What better way to propel cultural exchange than by tasting the melted cheese in a savory Salvadoran pupusa?

Dining out in Sacramento characteristically offers the opportunity to immerse oneself in the cultures of other lands. Try the expansive Hong Kong Islander on a busy morning for dim sum. You'll hear little other than Chinese dialects while enjoying the attention of the welcoming wait staff.

Then there are the YD House restaurants on Folsom and Freeport Boulevards. Its Korean servers are

happy to explain that the perplexing colorful scissors at the table are for cutting kimchi.

Queen Sheba on Broadway takes you to Ethiopia, with a staff excited to lead you through using their injera flatbread as an edible eating utensil with its potato and carrot stew.

Back at Las Palmas, a longtime Salvadoran outpost in South Sac for more than a decade, its most popular fare is, of course, the pupusa. But, the Gomez brothers' top-seller is the Pupusa Revuelta: beans, cheese and chicharrón (fried pork rind) in a cornmeal tortilla vessel.

Marvin, also from El Salvador, told me that the restaurant features "very home-like" food that he learned to cook from his mom while growing up. On a recent visit, I ordered the Salvadoran Yuca con Chicharrón plate. It included lightly breaded, deep-fried yuca, a delicious root vegetable that reminded me of Japanese yams and stuck to my ribs like good comfort food should. The dish was surrounded by generous portions of raw radish,

cucumber and lime that provided the counterpoint to the chicharrón, equal parts fried pork fat and succulent carnita-like meat.

Sal described the similarly comforting and Salvadoran Sopa de Gallina (chicken soup): Depending on the day, a leg and thigh or breast and wing are cooked in the soup's broth, then extracted, deep-fried and served next to the soup. It's a warm dish for the biting winter.

Despite its Salvadoran roots, Las Palmas also offers Mexican cuisine, a tribute to the restaurant's cross-cultural M.O. When I ordered beans as a side dish one day, the cashier asked, "Mexican beans or Salvadoran beans?" She pointed out that the primary difference was in the preparation, with pinto or black beans, respectively.

Marvin said he is proud of the restaurant's status as a cultural hub, with regulars from all over Central America, Mexico, Russia, Spain, the Caribbean and beyond. It's an edible reflection of Sacramento's diversity. □

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