

As Seen In

The
Press
DEMOCRAT

By [JEFF COX](#)
FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Rancho Viejo serves the best Mexican food in Sonoma County, pure and simple.

You might not even notice the place, tucked back behind the McDonald's where Route 12 meets Verano Avenue in Sonoma. From the outside it looks a little dilapidated, but inside it's warm and cheerful and one wall of an enclosed porch is painted with a mural depicting triumphant Mexican culture, while the other wall is lined with all sorts of Mexican tchotchkes.

Antonio Barrios does the cooking in the open stainless-steel kitchen. His wife, Genny, runs the room, waits on tables and makes sure you're comfortable. The cooking style is Yucatecan, influenced by southern Mexico and Mexico City. But the way the dishes come together in such delicious ways is pure Chef Barrios. It's not the haute Mexican cuisine of Rick Bayless at Topolobampo in Chicago. It's more like the home cooking you'd get at your Mexican grandma's house if you had a Mexican grandma. Everything is home-made, from the low-salt tortilla chips to the spicy green salsa that accompanies them to the hand-shaped gorditas that are the foundation of panuchos and huaraches. He uses no lard, but substitutes good olive oil. Fresh, local veggies and quality meats replace the tired ingredients found at too many Mexican restaurants.

This quality is immediately evident when you are presented with the chile relleno platter, called Chicken Poblano (\$12.50 ****) on the menu. Expensive? Yes, but this is no ordinary taqueria and no ordinary chile relleno. A fresh poblano pepper is peeled and stuffed with chicken and cheese, then dipped in an eggy, floury batter and lightly fried, and then topped with cheese and a sauce made with guajillo chilies, chicken stock, flour and tomato. The scent of bay leaves wafts from the sauce. On certain days, cheese or beef picadillo fillings may be offered. Over three visits, I've tried all three and each time I could only wonder why more of these dreamy chilies relleno aren't available at other Mexican restaurants.

Some foods are so delicious that they keep calling you back, the way a newly favorite song makes you want to hear it again and again. Besides the chili relleno, Rancho Viejo's Chicken Huaraches (\$13 ****) is another dish like that. Huaraches are those woven sandals popular in the tropics or at summer beaches here at home.

And this dish — a specialty of Mexico City — is so called because of the sandal-like shape of the hand-made gordita tortillas. These are thick tortillas that puff when fried and then spread with black beans and topped with strips of sautéed chicken, mushrooms, red bell peppers, onions, spicy green chilies and whole cloves of roasted garlic. A nice spiciness suffuses each bite. And the flavors of that bite come together in a way that turns their welter into a harmonious whole.

Even though these platters contain rice and either black or pinto beans and salad with pico de gallo, they are still expensive compared to most Mexican restaurants. But compared to most American restaurants, a nice, big plate full of hot, flavorful food this good at between \$10 and \$13 is a bargain. Again, this is no ordinary taqueria.

Tonio's ability to think outside the box is shown in his Loco Burrito (\$10.50 ***½). This crazy little burro is a vegetarian's dream. The rice and beans are cooked, but not the onions, mushrooms, tomatoes, lettuce, cilantro, guacamole, sour cream and cheese. So you get a healthy jumble of raw vegetables in each bite that gives a fresh and light flavor. The burrito is

Rancho Viejo



Best Mexican

Rancho Viejo in Sonoma offers friendly atmosphere, flavors that are hard to beat



JEFF KAN LEE / PD
The chile relleno platter at Rancho Viejo in Sonoma called Chicken Poblano has fresh poblano peppers stuffed with chicken and cheese or other fillings.

served wet with red enchilada sauce and melted cheese on top.

The restaurant has been open for just about a year, and the people of Sonoma seem to have already found it, as it's been well-stocked with customers on each visit — so much so that by the end of the night, the kitchen tends to run out of some menu items. Although that's frustrating for customers, it's a good sign that folks are eating up whatever the kitchen has to offer.

You'll find no bottles of commercial hot sauce on the tables. Dishes are spiced according to your wishes, and if you want to further spice up a plate, just ask for the homemade spicy salsa, or, if you a true fan of the big burn, order the Empanadas de Picadillo (\$12.50 ****). Two gorgeous empanadas — the best Mexican version of these little pasties I've ever found — are made from hand-formed, light but chewy gorditas, fried to a flaky puff and stuffed with spiced, marinated ground beef and topped with tomato sauce, melted cheese, and pickled onion bits. Shredded lettuce and pico de gallo are placed on the side along with rice and pinto beans. And then you'll see a small plastic cup with a light yellowish liquid in it. This is a fiery habanero sauce that will set your mouth aflame (in a good way), if you like that sort of thing.

Sometimes how “good” a food is depends on how well it meets the expectations of the consumer. In the case of Rancho Viejo's Chicken Mole (\$12.50 **½), its shredded chicken and brick red mole sauce confounded expectations of a dark brown sauce tasting of bitter Mexican chocolate. This was a light red sauce, made with spices and pepitas, and quite good for what it was. The mole is served with rice and pinto beans.

Cochinita Pibil (\$12.50 ***) is a traditional dish of the Yucatan. Originally, it involved cooking a whole baby pig, buried in a fire pit (pibil is a Mayan word for “buried”), but today pork shoulder is used. It marinates for a day in acidic bitter orange juice with achiote, a musky seed that imparts a rusty red color. It's cooked long and slow until very tender, then served with pickled onions, rice, pinto beans and lots of hot corn tortillas wherein to load the pork.

The closest thing to regular tacos you'll find at Rancho Viejo is another Yucatecan specialty: Panuchos (\$12 ***). These are two gorditas fried to a golden, puffy loveliness, smeared with refried black beans, then topped with chicken (or beef picadillo — your choice), a slice of tomato, pickled red onions, and everything

sprinkled with shredded lettuce. Rice and pinto beans are on the side. The fresh, sour pickled onions make the perfect contrast with the savory meat and beans.

For dessert, try the Fried Plantain Bananas (\$5.50 ***). The plantains are cut into rounds, then fried with a sweetener and set along the sides of a clear glass banana split dish. Two scoops of vanilla ice cream are set in between the banana slices, topped with a caramel-y guava sauce, and foamed with whipped cream. Yum.

To sum up: Everything you love about Mexican cooking, only so much more.