



La Veracruzana
- Fonda de
Mariscos
specializes in
scrumptious
fish dishes from
the Gulf state at
reasonable prices

BY NICHOLAS GILMAN
Special to The News

Our great metropolis, landlocked as it is, is only eight hours from the East Coast and five from the West, so some of Mexico's best seafood restaurants can be found right here in the Big Taco. Walking by La Veracruzana - Fonda de Mariscos, tucked into a corner of an old house in Colonia Roma. I was intrigued by the simple but charming retro decor, the sunny patio, and lots of happy looking diners, so I had to try it (several times). I wasn't disappointed.

Francisco Almaguer, who also owns the gay-friendly La Cortesana around the corner, has created a comfortable but unpretentious place, whose menu concentrates on specialties from Veracruz. The seafood-rich cuisine of this Gulf state, influenced by Afro-Cuban and Spanish kitchens, is poorly represented in our city. La Veracruzana sets out to remedy the situation.

The menu is divided into various categories. Entradas, which include tostadas and quesadillas (all of fish or seafood), are deep-fried but not greasy and seasoned with enough chile and garlic so as not to overwhelm the fish. The quesadillas de "cazón" (a small shark) were especially good. Several versions of ceviche are listed; the standard "de pescado" was one of the best I've eaten anywhere, full of fresh, firm "mojarra" (a medium-sized, somewhat oily fish), lightly marinated in lime juice and olive oil, with just a touch of garlic, onion, cilantro and chili to jazz it up.

Under the "Sopas y Caldos" section, there are several intriguing rice dishes. "Arroz a la tumbada," a soupy rice with seafood and tomatoes served in an individual clay "cazuela," is a Puerto classic and is done here to perfection, the sim-

SEAFOOD FEAST



Shrimp cooked in "jamaica" (hibiscus flower) and white wine sauce

ple, fresh ingredients well balanced, and the rice cooked to just the right firmness. Other rice dishes are prepared with shrimp, octopus, or simply with plátanos machos as a side dish.

You may have trouble choosing among mojarras, salmón and camarones, all menu categories unto themselves, and all tempting. The large whole mojarra is offered in several ways: fried, "al mojo de ajo" (with garlic and chile), "a la diábla" (with tomato-chile sauce) or "empapelado" (wrapped and steamed with tomato, onion and chile).

Other Veracruzana specialties include "filete a la talla" (fish grilled with chili sauce), "chile relleno de pescado" (a poblano chile stuffed with ground mixed seafood), and of course, the classic "huachinango a la veracruzana," whose fragrant Spanish-influenced sauce of sautéed to-

matoes, onions, capers and olives is expertly prepared here. That said, the "Sugerencias del Chef," seasonal specials, should not be missed.

Manager Sergio Bravo explained that he and his staff comb the Mercado de la Viga, Mexico City's massive central seafood market, for whatever looks best each day.

"Caldo de acamayas" is a current seasonal offering - plump freshwater shrimp from the waters of Veracruz, known as acamaya, have a sweet, lobster-like taste and luxuriate in a light chile-tomato bisque.

A rather ambitious special is shrimp cooked in "jamaica" (hibiscus flower) and white wine sauce. This is done with a subtle hand, the tart hibiscus flowers and simple wine sauce marrying well with the sweet sautéed shrimp.

Desserts, cakes and pies are artfully presented and well made.

MORE

Don't miss the chef's suggestions at this unpretentious place.

La Veracruzana - Fonda de Mariscos
Medellín 198-B, corner of Chiapas (behind Plaza Insurgentes), Colonia Roma
Tel: 5574-0474
Open daily 12:30 to 8 p.m.
All credit cards accepted

La Veracruzana offers full bar service.

The "torito" (a cocktail of aguardiente, fruit and milk) is popular, and there are small but reasonably priced wine, tequila and rum lists.

Speaking of prices, almost everything on the menu is 100 pesos or less, and three changing menus del día are offered, all featuring fish and seafood, for only 60 pesos.

With so many flashy, overpriced restaurants opening these days, it's nice to find a simple, inexpensive place, with friendly service, serving fresh, well-prepared food.

La Veracruzana has quickly become one of my favorite choices for seafood in the city.

Nicholas Gilman is author of "Good Food in Mexico City: A Guide to Food Stalls, Fondas and Fine Dining," which recently won the Gourmand Award, and is available at all online booksellers. His Web site is www.mexicocityfood.net.