



Photograph by Sean Penello

Tia Juana Bar & Grill's co-owner Greg Guittierez says his recipes are old ones he learned from his mother and grandmother, including homemade menudo, the popular Mexican dish believed to have curative powers.

Tia Juana Bar & Grill food is fast but with fresh twist

By JUDY PETERSON

If you don't have the time or money for a south-of-the-border vacation, just drop by the Tia Juana Bar & Grill in Sunnyvale for a taste of authentic Mexican food. The colorful cantina is as much a feast for the eyes as for the stomach.

Tucked away in a corner of the Fair Oaks Plaza shopping mall, Tia Juana has been open for 10 years. Its decor is fresh and bright, from the blue and yellow counter tops to the fancy paper lace *Fiesta Codelas* hanging from the ceiling. Large, hand-painted murals cover many of the walls, one of which is affectionately labeled "Speedy's Cocina." According to co-owner Greg Guittierez, "It's named after a guy who works in the kitchen who's really quick."

Tia Juana features fast food with a twist: all the ingredients used are fresh. Guittierez says, "That's one of the things people really love. We make all our own stuff. The recipes are old, original recipes I learned from my mom and grandma." In fact, a big sign at the front entrance notes that the sangria is homemade and menudo, the popular Mexican breakfast dish believed to have curative powers, is served on weekends.

The cantina opens at 9 a.m. daily, serving other favorites such as nopales mexicanos, a concoction of cactus mixed with eggs, onions, peppers and tomatoes.

When the clock moves over to the lunch hour, the menu expands to include traditional burritos stuffed with rice, beans, cheese, sour cream, guacamole and salsa. Choices range from

carne asada to carnitas to a veggie number that features mushrooms, carrots, zucchini, onions and peppers.

Combination plates of tacos, chile rellenos and tostadas are served on oversized dishes along with rice and beans. With such a variety to choose from, visitors can spend as little as \$2 for a tamale or go all out for a \$12 red snapper fillet. A whole section of the menu is dedicated to seafood platters.

Guittierez runs an efficient kitchen, which helps explain why customers start streaming in early for lunch. By noon, Tia Juana is almost full. Guittierez chases around the cantina taking and serving orders. "We have really good people working here, but I like to be here to make sure everything's okay," he says.

In addition to the Sunnyvale location, Guittierez and his two partners also own a Tia Juana in Fremont, which is large enough to host banquets. A third, more upscale eatery closed, Guittierez says, "because it was just too much for me."

Guittierez arrived in the United States from Michoacan in 1989 and began learning the restaurant trade, first as a dishwasher, then by busing tables. So he knows first-hand what it takes to make a booming business. Among the elements at the Tia Juana is booming Latin music, which makes one want to get up and dance as if at a real Mexican fiesta.

Tia Juana Bar & Grill is at 901 E. Duane Ave. in Sunnyvale. Hours are 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Saturday and 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Sundays. Phone 408.730.8578.