

Los Arcos a fantastic fusion of cultures

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It's been a while since I visited a Mexican restaurant for a review. As a matter of fact, I haven't done many Mexican restaurants over the past couple of years. This issue begins my third year as a semi-pro masticator, so let's celebrate that by getting back to one of America's favorite forms of ethnic food.

In doing so, let's try to avoid any boring old order-by-number business. I do love those places, but today we journey together to a place that has a

The **Tico Taco platter (\$9.99)** was my attempt at capturing the Costa Rican side of the fusion menu. It's a thick corn tortilla, open faced, with Costa Rican salad that resembled coleslaw (cabbage, red onion, carrot, cilantro and olive oil, but no mayonnaise!) and was topped with grilled steak and a block of queso fresco. The side of habanero salsa sneaks up on you, but is definitely not too hot to handle. The platter came with Costa Rican-style red beans and rice and Indian-style stewed potatoes that glow a bright yellow with bits of curry leaves.

On this particular night Los Arcos was out of their signature dessert, and I have since learned they have trouble keeping it in stock. So with tears in our eyes and a couple of margaritas on the rocks to ease the pain we planned a return trip.

Days later I made it back to Los Arcos to grab a dessert and a taco to go and maybe ask a few questions, but when Shah and Rocio discovered out I was the cuisine editor my quick excursion turned into an hour. They told me I had to try this and that and I succumbed, beginning with the **Samosa (\$2)**.

I also took home a **Tandoori Taco Platter (\$9.99)** that was opposite ends of the spectrum. Cloves and cardamom highlighted this dish served on Indian flatbread.

But the belle of the ball was the **Tico Tamale (\$7.99)**. I am a tamale lover, but this was unlike any I've ever had. Let's just say the Costa Ricans take it to the next level. This was chicken-based tamale, and yes, there was commeal, but not much. The majority of the filling was capers, garbanzo beans, potatoes, rice, raisins, olives, and red bell peppers. Rocio has forsaken the traditional corn husk in favor of a banana leaf. I will be back for another one of these.

Tres Leches (\$4.75) is the dessert that prompted my return. Soaked in three kinds of milk, this cake begs no question why they keep running out. Next visit will be for the homemade flan.

This is a must-try place. A beautiful patio area is now home to live music on Thursday and Friday and a new Tandoori oven will be there soon. Shah and Rocio are passionate about their food and their cultures and are willing to let the menu evolve. "Different foods for different moods," Shah says. Different, indeed. And to think I left the house for a simple taco.



Photo/Dan Anderson

more sophisticated menu — a place called Los Arcos.

Los Arcos is a hot topic on Old Shell Road, landmarked between Satori and Mellow Mushroom, only a hop and a skip from the USA campus. The deal is it isn't a run-of-the-mill Mexican joint. Yes, you can get your combos, a la carte tacos and tamales, but the surprise is the fusion menu. This place prides itself on being a Mexican restaurant that is a front for an Indian/Costa Rican eatery! Sound weird? It's not as odd as you may think.

Shahrukh Siddiqui is a charismatic man from India who joined forces with his wife Rocio, a Costa Rican native, to take over Los Arcos last January. It's been there for years, but these two have pumped some interesting new life into the menu and scenery. Rocio assures me there is an enormous Indian population in Costa Rica, and from our conversation, I have no idea which of the Siddiquis is more of the driving force behind this menu. Each homeland is equally represented in dishes that range from Tandoori Chicken tacos and fajitas to Costa Rican tamales. You are just as likely to find curry as you would Sangria.

So I began this voyage in search of Mexican food but wound up with many more options than I expected. My lovely wife Missy knows I will always judge south-of-the-border cuisine by trying the tacos and tamales. Tonight was no different. The **taco (\$2)** was as good as any with the tangy jack cheese waking up my palate. The **tamale (\$2.75)** was better than most. It's actually my favorite standard tamale retrieved from any Mexican place around here. It reminded me of a tamale stand from my childhood in my hometown of Laurel, Miss.

Tableside guacamole (\$6.99) really adds to the experience and is a must for anyone fond of the green stuff. The kind waitress saved a couple of slices for my wife who strangely loves avocado but despises guacamole. At any rate, you are guaranteeing freshness when you watch it prepared before you.

Missy went straight combo F40, treating herself to the **beef burrito and chili relleno (\$7.50)**. This came with a side of rice, and once again, the quality of the cheese was noteworthy. It's not that adventurous, but my baby is a creature of habit. I, on the other hand, was just beginning.



Photo/Dan Anderson

This is basically an Indian empanada, internally spicy, served with cilantro chutney and salsa. A Costa Rican empanada with red bell pepper is also in the works.

They were kind enough to let me sample their ceviches made with fresh gulf seafood. The first was an orange roughy (Shah's favorite fish) that was incredible, and of course a Gulf shrimp ceviche that's hard to beat. The ceviche is Shah's baby and he's experimented with everything from specks to amberjack. Some flavors, the latter in particular, are too fishy for ceviche, but we may see one with red snapper soon.

Los Arcos
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