

The Record (New Jersey)

AT BLUE MOON MEXICAN CAFE IN ENGLEWOOD

Section: LIFESTYLE / PREVIEWS

The Record RENE A. MACK , Restaurant Reviewer

Column: CASUAL DINING

At 6 p.m. on a Saturday, there was already a line out the door. That's what happens when restaurants don't take reservations and have only 65 seats.

Inside the **Blue Moon Mexican Cafe**, people were picking up takeout, and hopeful guests were spilling over from the tiny bar area, almost touching the dining tables. They had that anxious look in their eyes. You could almost read their thoughts: "Hurry up, drink the coffee! I'm starving!"

Despite such angst, the **Blue Moon Mexican Cafe** is a cozy and inviting restaurant. The dining room has a simple yellow-and-brown scheme and incorporates wood floors and brick walls, and images of the sun and **moon** in the form of mirrors and light fixtures.

The welcome mat is out for kids. The **Blue Moon** gives each little guest a packet of sugary treats and a **blue** neon wristband. There's even a baby changing station in the women's restroom. But, as the evening matures, so does the crowd. Families give way to blondes in black, guys with buzz cuts, friends in deep

conversation, and couples on dates. Through it all, the service is casual and friendly.

The menu is quintessential **Mexican**-American. The portions are gigantic, the prices value-driven. Quesadillas, nachos, chili, fajitas, burritos, enchiladas, and chimichangas - all have a home here.

The house salad (\$3.95) comes in a heaping bowl of fresh, crisp romaine lettuce with red and green pepper rings, mushrooms, black olives, cucumber slices, and the all-too-familiar hothouse tomatoes. With a savory poppy seed dressing, this is a light and refreshing start to any meal.

For a sampling of nearly all the appetizers, dig into the fiesta platter, which features nachos, **moon** wings, jalapeño poppers, a mini-quesadilla, celery, carrots, refried beans, and the mandatory guacamole and sour cream.

The platter could feed a small family army.

Another off-the-menu appetizer is shrimp poppers - an abomination. I will give the restaurant credit for cleaning the shrimp (something that doesn't always happen when the little crustaceans get battered and fried), and the appetizer looked tempting enough, with five medium shrimp on a bed of lettuce and two little bowls of honey mustard dressing and sour cream. But what's the point of taking already mild and delicate shrimp, annihilating them with a blanket of hot red jalapeño peppers, smothering them with mozzarella cheese, and sealing them in a tomb of fried bread crumbs? It's just a waste of good shrimp.

The entree specials were outstanding and contain items probably not found in Mexico. Among the treasures was honey lime salmon

with garlic jalapeño mashed potatoes (\$15.95), which was beautifully presented. The wonderful cut of salmon, vibrant in color and framed by singe marks, was served with a salsa of green and red peppers, onion, and cilantro. Buffered by the potatoes and garnished with romaine leaves, diced cucumber, tomato wedges, and lemon twists, it's a superb entree.

The restaurant's numero uno menu item is a giant combination platter (\$9.95 and \$11.95). Patrons have a choice of tacos, burritos, enchiladas, tostados, or chimichangas. All come with rice and beans. The chimichangas at the **Blue Moon** are as thin as Chinese spring rolls and super crisp - there's not a trace of oil. What there is too much of is chicken, and what there is too little of is cheese. There's nothing else. The result is a very dry, stringy, and dull chimichanga that even salsa and sour cream can't enliven. Guacamole costs an additional \$2, and it's less than spunky.

The chef butterflies a chicken breast for Southwestern chicken, then scorches it to create an absolutely beautiful and appetizing centerpiece (\$11.95). Tender and juicy, the chicken is marinated in fresh lime juice and dabbed with honey and cilantro before it hits the charcoal grill.

Considering the nachos, fiesta platter, and then the entree, not to mention the fried ice cream (\$4.95) for dessert (which we couldn't resist), we realize that within our dining out plans there needs to be included a trip to the gym or a few hours on the Stairmaster.

Blue Moon Mexican Cafe

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21 E. Palisade Ave.

Englewood

- Poor

* Fair

* * Good

* * * Excellent

* * * * Outstanding