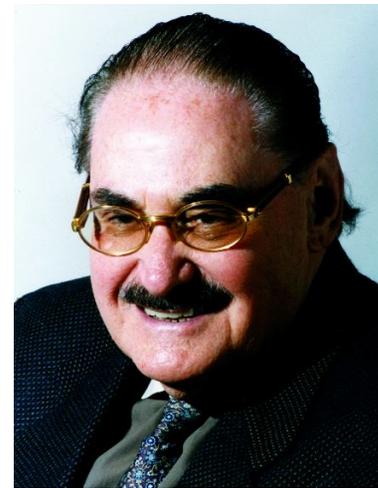


Dining Out with Sheldon Landwehr

Abuelo's Mexican Food Embassy

Photography by Pat Haverfield. Food styling by Kat Hughes



Fajita Trio - Abuelo's combination fajita steak and chicken with an additional half order of Yucatan BBQ shrimp. Served with grilled onions, frijoles charros, guacamole, sour cream, shredded cheeses, pico de gallo and flour tortillas.



Impressive, life-size statues, paintings, greenery and a central water fountain surround diners in a relaxing and memorable environment.



Traditional Flan - Abuelo's award-winning recipe of traditional Mexican egg custard



Shrimp Chowder - Creamy shrimp soup with roasted green chiles and corn.

Lakeland, Florida

*** Put aside any Mexican preconceptions. Abuelo's, a national chain of 38 high-quality Mexican restaurants recently unleashed their first Florida venue discovered in Lakeland (mid Orlando and Tampa).

Abuelo's undisputedly delivers authentic Mexican fare with exuberance and flair via a menu listing a diversity of styles of cooking tastes and textures, only a few of them blisteringly spicy-hot, and all of them arranged with tantalizing craft. The bill-of-fare draws from a multitudinous repertoire of recipe characteristics clearly prepared from scratch daily and not infrequently twice a day.

Abuelo's spaciousness offering seating for 240 guests, is by far the most artistically festive and charming place to linger over topical cocktails or dark or light frosty Mexican brews, shared by Abuelo's Dip Sampler -- a flamboyant, light and fresh, richly seasoned trio of dips to be slathered on paper-thin shells of crispy nachos. Well-spaced tables allow privacy amid its classical Mexican architecture including a center courtyard festooned with imported stonework, life-size sculptures and Diego Rivera paintings.

Traditionalists should latch--on to The Grande, a colossal, preeminent uniting of three enchiladas (beef, cheese, sour-cream chicken), cheese chile relleno, tamale, crispy beef taco all adroitly orchestrated by piquant, rich guacamole. Abuelo's likewise serves an uppermost Chile Manzanillo -- crab skillfully stuffed in a fresh roasted poblano strewn with shrimp, scallops, mushrooms and red peppers in a creamy, lightly herbed lobster sauce. Its aromatic flavor and texture merge triumphal, thus abundantly benefiting one's palate.

Among eight homemade soups we found the cautiously seasoned, full-bodied shrimp chowder irresistibly flavorsome, floating nuggets of shrimp, roasted green chiles and kernels of corn.

While food here in the main is creatively aggrandized, misfires occasionally occur. The filling Fajita Trio, for example, a sizzling medley of steak, chicken as well as a half-order of Yucatan BBQ shrimp, its steak portion might be disappointedly dry and tough, having been exposed too long to the fire. Pescado Guerrero, another example, is an exceptionally distinctive concoction marred by over-grilling the thick slab of fresh mahi-mahi, consequently turning it dry and crumbly.

On the flip-side, a flawless, delicious, substantial, exciting dish is the high-and-mighty Los Mejores De La Casa, a luxurious admixture of wood-grilled bacon-wrapped tenderloin medallions side-by-side with bacon-wrapped shrimp stuffed with jalapeno and blended cheeses, accompanied by papas con chile and frijoles charros. Pechuga con calabaza is the juiciest sautéed chicken breast we ever encountered. It arrives chicly adorned with sliced zucchini, roasted red peppers and corn in a softly-spiced cream sauce. A standout fish entree, Tilapia Veracruz, comes to table thickly cut, sensitively sautéed and prettily garnished with generous amounts of shrimp, scallops, tomatoes, roasted poblano strips, chile and olives sided with rice and fresh broccoli.

Don't snub Abuelo's happy endings. Don't miss the glorious homemade, shimmering, silky flan or perhaps the satisfactory tres leches cake.

All-in-all, the food is fresh, vivid in flavors and colors with intriguing textural interplay and unexpected tastes. Sauces are far from the pasty, homogenized Taco Bell' sauces.

This is sophisticated food, albeit the reasonable prices do not reflect it (entrees range \$12.79 to \$17.49), served by a well-trained, young staff with ready answers for all questions, rendered with ability and energy.

Some dishes are so unfamiliar that they are an acquired taste, but most likely you will be fully pleased.

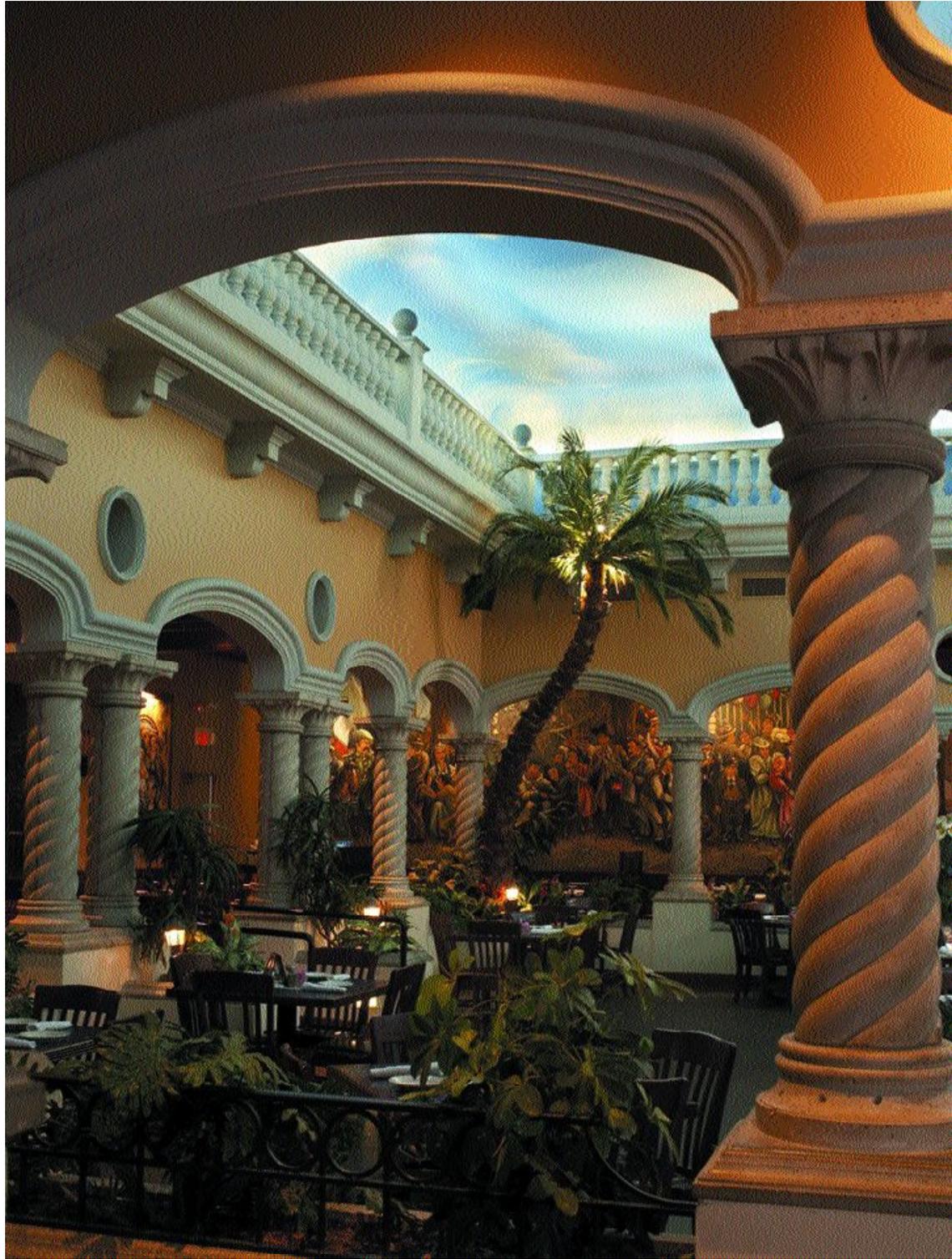
Abuelo's Mexican Embassy, 3700 Lakeside Village Blvd., Lakeland, Florida. Phone: 863-686-7500. Serves lunch and dinner 7 days. No reservations



ChileManzanillo - Crab imperial stuffed in a fresh roasted poblano covered with shrimp, scallops, mushrooms and red peppers in a creamy lobster sauce. Served with rice and seasoned broccoli.



Pescado Guerrero - Wood-grilled mahi mahi steak with shrimp, scallops, mushrooms, fresh spinach, roasted peppers and sliced avocado in a white wine sauce. Served with rice and fresh broccoli.



Abuelo's Interior - In the true spirit of a kind grandfather or Abuelo, Agustin De La Rosa, a respected leader of post-Spanish Mexico, was revered for his wisdom and compassion for children. He is permanently honored as one of Jalisco's eminent citizens in bronze sculpture form at Plaza de los Hombres Ilustres in Guadalajara, the original of which was the inspiration for this signature sculpture that holds an important place of honor in every Abuelo's restaurant.

Each Abuelo's restaurant is designed as an open-air Mexican Courtyard to replicate the Mexican style service that is so right for business entertaining as well as family celebrations



Los Mejores de la casa - A combination of bacon-wrapped tenderloin medallions, and bacon-wrapped shrimp stuffed with jalapeno and blended cheeses. Both are wood-grilled and served with papas con chile and frijoles charros.



The Grande - The ultimate combination! Three enchiladas, one beef, one cheese, and one sour cream chicken, cheese chile relleno, tamale, crispy beef taco and guacamole.



Pechuga con Calabaza - Lightly sauteed chicken breast with sliced zucchini, roasted red peppers and corn in a spicy cream sauce. Served with rice and frijoles charros.