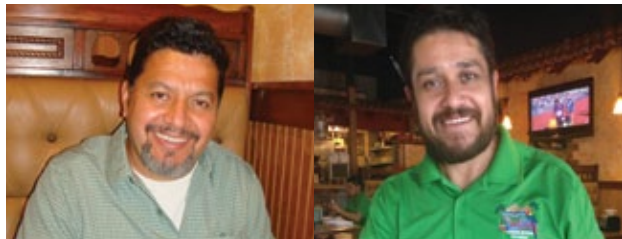




FIESTA CANCUN

BY RICH BELMONT

This restaurant is locally owned but you might think it is part of a chain of Mexican Restaurants because the same partners are invested in four of them. There is Fiesta Cancun in Dubuque, IA, Fiesta En Cancun in Freeport, IL, Las Palmas in Dixon, IL and Las Palmas in Platteville, WI. There is also a Fiesta Cancun in Platteville but that one is not associated with these other four restaurants.



Fiesta Cancun has been operating in Dubuque for six years. It is owned by Alfredo Luna and Vincente Cazares. They both grew up in Guanajuato the capitol city of the Mexican State of Guanajuato. Although they lived only about a 45 minutes drive from each other they did not meet until fate brought them together in Dubuque.

Alfredo came to the US in 1968 and worked in Chicago for many years. He moved to Dubuque when he had the opportunity to open Fiesta Cancun. Vincente came to this country 18 years ago and went to work in Los Angeles. Ten years ago he found himself working at Fiesta Cancun in Platteville. Four years later he was offered a partnership with the restaurant of the same name in Dubuque.

This restaurant became so popular right after it opened Alfredo and Vincente decided they needed to take out the large bar and install more tables. Now there is a small bar with only 5 seats but that's ok because mostly Margaritas, Daiquiris, beer and wine are served.

There is still a Mexican feel to the place since all of the walls are adorned with sombreros and ponchos. The booths are made from decorative wood and a couple of them even have brightly colored depictions of Mexican scenery.



Margarita Specials available all day Monday through Thursday is one of the reasons Fiesta Cancun is so popular. The Regular 14 oz. Margarita is specially priced at \$1.99 instead of the standard \$4.25. The Jumbo 27 oz. is \$2.95 instead of \$8.25 and the Monster 46 oz. is just \$5.99 rather than the normal \$11.99 price.

The cuisine in this establishment is authentic Mexican and is just what the people of Dubuque have come to expect. There is no doubt there is something for everyone. Vincente told me there are 130 items on the menu but I counted over 180 not counting the 29 side orders!

There are 5 lunch specials and 33 lunch plates served only 11 am to 3 pm Monday through Saturday. The dinners can be ordered any time.

When you visit Fiesta Cancun I recommend you take some time to look over the entire menu. You will find there are some truly exceptional Mexican delights buried amongst all those entrées.

Here are some of them in no particular order:

Chile Poblano (chi-lee poh-BLAH-noh): This is also called a Chile Relleno (chi-lee reh-YEH-noh). It consists of a mild poblano pepper stuffed with scrambled eggs and queso blanco (here white American cheese is used). It is coated in an egg batter and carefully fried.



Camarones Guanajuato (kah-mah-ROHN-ehs gwana-wat-oh): Twelve bacon wrapped shrimp served with rice and guacamole salad. The dish is so named because these shrimp are very popular in Guanajuato and besides, most of the employees at this restaurant are from there.



Pollo Loco (POY-oh low-co): It means "crazy chicken" and consists of two grilled chicken breasts with raw onions topped with a "crazy" special sauce.

Pollo Popeye: Grilled chicken breast topped with sautéed spinach and melted cheese.



Fajitas Rancheras: The most ordered fajitas dinner. It has copious amounts of bacon, chicken, steak and shrimp (with this dish and some of the bacon wrapped shrimp stolen from Mike Ironside, 365ink's feature writer's dinner Bryce Parks, publisher of 365ink was in heaven overdosing on his favorite pig part: bacon, bacon, bacon!)

House Fajitas: The second most ordered fajitas dinner. This one is also loaded with four meats but contains sliced pork instead of bacon.



Steak Jalisco: Ribeye steak cooked with mushrooms and grilled shrimp. It is one of the most popular meats in the City of Guadalajara in the State of Jalisco.



Chile Verde: Chunks of pork mixed with a green (verde) sauce.



Chicken Chimichanga: Flour tortillas filled with white chicken baked in chicken soup with bell peppers, tomatoes, onions and black pepper.

One of the ways I measure a Mexican restaurant is to try their Carnitas. This can be shredded or pulled pork but like here are usually pork tips. In a good restaurant the pork is slow roasted and seasoned with a delicious homemade spice blend and served when it can be pulled apart by a fork. I must tell you at Fiesta Cancun the Carnitas is one of the best versions of this Mexican specialty I have ever had. If you like Puerco (pork) as much as I do you must try this dinner!

Many Americans believe Mexican cuisine is mostly about spicy, burning hot foods. Of course this is not true and in fact the cooks at Fiesta Cancun purposely prepare mostly mild specialties. If you like spicy you can request more heat or you can add one or more salsas. The ones on your table are:

Tapatio (tah-pah-TEE-o) Salsa Picante (pee-CON-tay) (hot sauce). It is made in Vernon, CA and its ingredients are red

peppers, salt, spices and garlic. It has a smoky flavor and is really not that hot; about 3,000 Scoville units. The name, by the way, indicates a person from Guadalajara.

El Yucateco (you-ka-tec-o) Salsa Picante de Chile Habanero Verde (green hot sauce) made from green Habanero peppers, acetic acid, salt, spices and preservatives.

El Yucateco Salsa Picante de Chile Habanero Roja (red hot sauce). Made from red Habanero peppers, acetic acid, salt, spices and preservatives.

Many people engage in friendly arguments regarding whether the red or green sauce tastes better and which one is hotter. Actually they both have the same ingredients except one has green peppers and the other has red. They both contain acetic acid which is vinegar. They both are about 9,000 Scoville units so they are equally hot. You can draw your own conclusions. El Yucateco refers to a native of Yucatan.

I believe a fresh hot sauce always trumps a commercial bottled one. So I recommend you spice up your dinner by ordering the homemade Tomatillo Salsa Picante. It has a great flavor and a very pleasant after-burn. Here it is made from chile de arbol peppers, tomatillos, onions, cilantro, garlic and salt.

You probably expect Mexican food to include a lot of red tomato salsa. But don't let that stop you from trying anything on the menu that includes the word Verde (green) like Chile Verde or Enchiladas Verdes. That's because the Tomatillo Salsa Verde made in this kitchen is excellent. It is made from tomatillos, onions, peeled jalapeños and tomatillo juice. It's not spicy hot but it spikes up the flavor of anything topped with it.

The Tomatillo (tohm-ah-TEE-oh) is the fruit of a plant native to Mexico. It resembles a small tomato but has a papery tarnish-green husk. It usually has a bright green skin but can also be yellow or purple. It has a pale yellow flesh with a tart, lemony herb flavor.

A couple of other things you should know: all the sauces, batters and fillings are made from scratch. The rice and beans are prepared fresh daily and are never held over from one day to the next. There is a semi-sort of private area where you can hold a private party for up to 56 people. During the summer you can enjoy your lunch or dinner al fresco on the outdoor patio.



And one more thing: no matter what you order you get a lot of food. So you must be careful to save room for dessert! Every really good Mexican restaurant will tempt you with Flan. Here this traditional Mexico City style cream caramel custard is baked fresh daily from eggs, Kahlúa, condensed, evaporated, and whole milk. It is so good! Or you can choose an apple or banana burrito,

Sopapilla with ice cream or the scrumptious Fried Vanilla Ice Cream coated with corn flakes and delicately fried. There is also a dessert I have not seen before called Xango (pronounced Chan-go). It is a flour tortilla stuffed with cheesecake.

So visit Fiesta Cancun soon and ¡Buen Provecho! (Enjoy your meal!).

FIESTA CANCUN

2515-1 N.W. Arterial, Dubuque, IA 52002
563-588-1350 • FiestaCancunDubuque.com

Hours: Mon–Thu: 11 AM–10 PM; Fri–Sat: 11 AM–11 PM; Sun: 11 AM–9 PM

Dining Style: Come as you are

Noise Level: Conversational

Recommendations: Enchilada, Burrito, Chile Relleno (chile poblano), Fajitas Rancheras, House Fajitas, Camarones Guanajuato, Grande Burrito Bandera, Carne Asada, Steak Jalisco, Carnitas, Chile Verde, Acapulco Chimichanga, Pollo Popeye, Pollo Loco, Flan, Fried Ice Cream

Liquor Service: Limited Bar, Margaritas, Beer, Wine

Prices: Lunch: \$6.25–\$9.50; Dinner: \$9.25–\$18.99

Pay Options: Cash, Debit, MasterCard, Visa, Discover, AMEX, NO checks

Accessibility: Front door and restrooms

Kids Policy: Menu: Yes; Boosters: Yes; High Chairs: Yes

Reservations: No—call ahead for 6 or more

Catering: Yes • **Take Out:** Yes • **Delivery:** No

Parking: Strip Mall Lot