

Tyler's Villa Monetz Latin Kitchen - Lovely venue, vistas, service – ceviche needs work

Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
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When leaving Tyler's Cowan Center after the Lyle Lovett show recently, I made a wrong turn and headed out the Old Henderson Highway. Realizing my mistake, I turned around in a driveway that led up to Villa Montez, the stately home that was once The Mansion on the Hill. The place was beautifully lit and the aromas so enticing, I decided to take my mom there on her birthday.

Villa Montez has it all when it comes to destination dining.

From the moment you step onto the lovely grounds, it's hard to believe you're in East Texas. Lovely rooms look out over the tops of live oaks, making you feel like you're dining in a tree house. A wrap-around desk invites guests to enjoy al fresco meals. The mansion's upstairs has rooms large enough for private, elegant celebrations.

Last Wednesday, we decided on a light lunch, beginning with a large bowl of fresh guacamole (\$7.99), made with green gold avocados, fresh lime juice, onion, cilantro and Serrano peppers, accompanied by a glass of the house Chardonnay.



The dish was as billed – fresh. It was creamy, smooth and seasoned just right. The Serrano peppers offered a nice, bright heat that got your attention, but didn't blow out your taste buds.

We followed the appetizer with tortilla soup (\$6.99), which has chilled chicken with pico de gallo, a rich, deeply flavored chicken consume, cheese, avocado and is topped with crispy tortilla chips. The broth was heavily seasoned with smoked paprika, but rather than overbearing, the spice was the perfect complement to the rich, almost creamy broth.

Our server then recommended the ceviche (\$9.99). Villa Montez serves it three ways – Peruvian, with tomato broth, aji peppers and red onion; tropical with mango salsa and coconut milk; or Mediterranean with capers, onions, oregano and ouzo.

The chef was serving the tropical ceviche, so we decided to try it.

Mistake. Big mistake.



According to Wikipedia, ceviche is a seafood dish popular in the coastal regions of the Americas, especially Central and South America. The dish is typically made from fresh raw fish marinated in citrus juices such as lemon or lime and spiced with chili peppers. Additional seasonings such as onion, salt, coriander and pepper may also be added. Ceviche is usually accompanied by side dishes that complement its flavors such as sweet potato, lettuce, corn or avocado.

In Texas, ceviche is almost always prepared with cucumber and tomatoes, making it like a seafood gazpacho – light and refreshing. It really is one of my favorite foods.

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The secret to good ceviche is that it must be made fresh every few hours, as the longer the seafood “cooks” in the citrus juice, the tougher it gets.

Our ceviche was not made Wednesday morning. I'm not sure it was created Tuesday, either. Tasted more like Monday morning, 6 a.m.

The fish and shrimp were so shriveled and tough, it was almost impossible to get a fork tine through it.

I'm not sure I'll ever request a “tropical” ceviche again. I like my straight up with lime, onion and pepper. No sweet pineapple or mango syrupy stuff to overpower the fish flavor. Yuck.

Villa Montez's lunch and dinner menus are extensive.

Several appetizers sounded delicious, including lettuce wraps (\$8.99) made with jalapeno jelly, basil, mint, grilled veggies and romaine lettuce; queso fundido (\$6.99), caramelized onion, roasted peppers with melted cheese and warm tortillas; mazatlan aji azado (\$10.99), fresh sashimi grade tuna chile rubbed and blackened colache and chipotle vinaigrette; nachos locas (\$8.99); chinos latino rolls (\$7.99) wrapped with roasted chicken, spinach, cream corn, black beans and cheese, served with jalapeno jelly; barbacoa sopes (\$7.99), three traditional corn mesa boats filled with beef, barbacoa, tomato and Mexican cheese and lettuce, drizzled with lime crema and salsa verde; and the American standard spinach and artichoke dip (\$7.99), spiced up a bit with jalapeno peppers.



Along with tortilla soup, they offer a Brazilian Coconut soup (\$7.99) made with coconut lime broth, chicken, mushrooms and cilantro, topped with crispy tortilla chips.

Since we were there for light lunch, we didn't indulge in heavier entrees like burrito maya (\$7.99) with its choice of barbacoa, Yucatan sweet pork or chicken tinga, filled with verde rice, beans and topped with red and green sauce, sour cream and tomatoes or the chicken chimichanga (\$8.99), the pollo durango (\$8.99) pan seared chicken, with onion, mushrooms and cilantro, simmered in a tomatillo cream sauce or the Rosarita fish tacos (\$9.99), topped with a mango salsa and served with Mexican coleslaw, rice and beans.

Although everything we saw delivered from the expanded, remodeled gourmet kitchen looked delicious, I had a hard time getting past the shriveled pieces of seafood in my three-day old ceviche.

As my 83-year-old mother says, “You never have a second chance to make a good first impression.”



For my money, Marisco's on East Erwin has Tyler's best ceviche. It doesn't come from a sparkling chef's kitchen, and it's served in a chilled beer stein, but it's been fresh and perfectly prepared every time I've ordered it over the past three years.

My mom doesn't like Marisco's and Mr. Mathews wouldn't go near raw anything, so I time my visits and get carry out for the drive home. It comes in a paper cup, but it's so good that it's usually gone by the time I hit the driveway an hour later.

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Will I go back to Villa Montez? Maybe. The guacamole and soup were very good.

I'd like to try the dinner menu. Our server was attentive. When Mom knocked over her wine glass, the ensuing mess was quickly cleaned up and wine replaced without fuss or charge.

I will not, however, be having the ceviche.

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Villa Montez is open Monday through Thursday from 11 a.m. until 9 p.m. and on Friday and Saturday from 11 a.m. until 10 p.m. Call 903-592-9696 for reservations, which are recommended on weekends and for large parties. See their website, www.villamontez.com/ for a complete menu. □

If you use Fifth Street, go past Tyler Junior College and Loop 323. The restaurant is located on your left. If you go around the loop from Highway 69, turn left on Hwy. 64 and the remodeled 1930s mansion is about one mile on the left.