

Restaurant Review: Amigos Cantina

By CAROLINE LEE For The Sunday Gazette

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SCHUYLERVILLE - How civilized it would be to have all our favorite restaurants within walking distance of our homes. In a perfect world, Amigo's Cantina would be right down the street. It's cute, it's casual in a pleasant and relaxing way, and I love the food. There must be a lot of half-filled paint cans in the basement at Amigo's because every wall and even the ceiling is painted a different, vibrant color, which actually works quite well. There's a high ledge opposite the bar that holds Mexican tchotchkes and punched-metal lanterns. My friend Melissa and I were greeted by a friendly face when we arrived early on a weeknight. The days are getting short, and I was glad to see the cheerful dining room in full daylight. "There's a patio, as well," Melissa said.

Amigo's fans have put forward its virtues, and I must agree with them. We had a pleasant, comfortable evening in a charming space where the staff ran the place like a clock, and an organized kitchen turned out terrific food. You start with a bowl of warm tortilla chips and a small bowl of freshly made salsa. "The first bowl is free," said Melissa, one of Amigo's proponents. "It's two dollars a bowl after." This sounds fair to me, and you would be wise to take the advice on the menu: Why overchip? dinner's coming!

The washed-out denim napkins are soft and friendly from wear, and the knit place mats are thick and homey. Some restaurants present their food with obvious pleasure and without pretentiousness in simple surroundings; Amigo's is in that category. I think that's why it feels so comfortable. I liked the salty chips, and the fresh salsa. "It's medium," said the server in response to my query. "That's the only way we make it." Thanks to my recent visit to Chipotle, I have a good idea how many calories are in those chips, but I enjoyed them anyway.

What should you eat? Well, most starters are familiar standbys, nachos, guacamole and con queso dip, Mexican pizza, and I was glad to see there were also crab cakes (\$8.50). For the main course you can have fajitas (\$15.95 for chicken, \$2 more for steak), chimichangas (\$15.95), arroz con pollo (\$17.95),

or a combination platter (\$11.95 - \$17.95). I like the idea of choosing what you like, a burrito, enchilada, taco, or tamale, or perhaps some combination of them, including two sides to round them out. There are other entrees and you can also order a la carte. Entrees are paired with complementary sides, but the combination platters allow you to choose from refried or black beans, Spanish rice, or salad. Melissa had it all figured out. "I'm getting the spinach enchiladas," she said. I thought this sounded good, but she changed her mind. "A pork tamale with refried beans and Spanish rice (\$11.95)" she decided. As soon as I saw the menu I knew what I was going to have: fish tacos (\$16.95). Ever since I learned I love fish I've been dying to try them, and here they were. I placed my order happily, and talked Melissa into splitting a small Mexican pizza to start. We got the pizza with beef (\$8.95), and it arrived just long enough after we were done with the chips to appreciate it. A browned flour tortilla about ten inches diameter was topped with fresh chopped tomatoes, sliced black olives, scallions, melted cheese, black beans, and shredded beef. "There isn't too much of any one thing that would make it messy or hard to eat," Melissa said, eating hers with fork and knife. I examined the piece perched in my hand and agreed. I liked the shredded beef, it was a much better idea than steak cubes which can be chewy. A small pizza is a good starter for two.

The dining room was filling up. A platter of fajitas went by the table, trailing its wonderful fragrance of hot onion and beef. It was delivered several tables away, and we heard the sizzle for a good long time, like three or four minutes. That was one hot plate. Our server removed our empty plates promptly and returned with thick coiled place mats, which were up to the job of protecting the handsomely painted table top from hot fajita plates. Our meals were noiseless and just hot enough. I love fish tacos, I learned, and they make perfect sense. Chunks of white, flaky, mild fish and shredded iceberg lettuce filled two crisp taco shells to overflowing. I asked for the dill-caper sauce on the side, and asked Melissa to give it a try: "It's kind of like tartar sauce," she said. I topped the tacos with the remaining salsa; the chunks of fresh tomato went perfectly with the fish. But let me tell you about the cabbage. You're reading that right. Cabbage comes on the side with this dish, and it was my favorite part of the meal. It's shredded, as you might expect, and sauteed with some magic stuff, which I suspect is not vegetarian. The waitress wasn't sure. "They season it with some kind of spices," she said, vaguely. I liked the side salad in the corn tortilla shell, and at first avoided the thick green dressing, which turned out to be friendly, mild cilantro-lime. The salad had tightly coiled red leaf lettuce and other greens. I even ate the shell. If I could find a criticism of my meal, it was that the rice was lukewarm, not hot. Mmm. I liked the looks of Melissa's refried beans, with melted cheese on top. I might have

gone for that first, but the tamale looked intriguing, as it was broad and high, "Here's where all the pork is," said Melissa, pointing beyond the neat corn husk to the inside with her fork. Melissa always orders the Spanish rice. She added a side of sour cream to her meal (\$.50). After having chips and pizza, Melissa picked at her supper and had most wrapped to take home. Besides, there was dessert to consider. I had finished my tacos.

We had excellent, friendly service throughout the meal, and when our plates were cleared we were handed dessert menus. Desserts are homemade, and not to be missed. I was really impressed with the Mexican flan (\$4.95), whose strong caramel flavor came cleanly through. It was dense around the edges and softer in the middle, not how I cook mine, and it was infinitely better. The key lime pie had just enough tang, and the whipped cream added a bit of sweetness. I was impressed. It wasn't until later that I realized that the desserts (\$4.50 each) had been left off the bill, which came to \$49.05. I'll send the restaurant a check, including tax and gratuity.

In my imaginary neighborhood, Amigo's Cantina is at the end of the street. That's so I can review, remember, and revisit my Mexican meal on a leisurely stroll back home

WHERE: Amigos Cantina, 42 Ferry Street, Schuylerville. Phone 695-9595.
www.amigoscantina.net

WHEN: Tuesday to Sunday 4:30 to 9:30 or so. Open Mondays during July and August

HOW MUCH: \$49.05 with tax and tip, plus an additional \$9.90 for dessert

MORE INFO: Children's menu. Wheelchair accessible. Patio open in warm weather. Parking across from restaurant on Walnut Lane or limited on-street parking. Reservations recommended. Credit cards: Master Card, Visa, American Express, Discover.

Capsule: I love Amigo's Cantina: the colorful dining room, friendly service, relaxing and unpretentious atmosphere, but most of all I like the food. Don't fill up on the fresh chips and salsa, have a Mexican pizza and put together your favorites from the combination menu. I like the side salads, and especially, their homemade desserts. **Grade: A**