

Mariscos El Cristalazo serves seafood in a monster martini glass



The restaurant's signature and namesake dish: lime- and chili-marinated shrimp and pen shell clams served in an oversized martini glass. (Cathy Chaplin)

By **Cathy Chaplin**

MARCH 3, 2015, 9:56 AM

Name: Mariscos El Cristalazo, named after the monster martini glass in which the restaurant's signature dish is served.

The chef: Ninive "Cristal" Vargas, a former server and self-trained chef, makes a seamless transition from underground *mariscos* cook to brick-and-mortar proprietor.

Concept: Vargas brings family recipes from her hometown of Escuinapa in the Mexican state of Sinaloa to La Puente in the San Gabriel Valley. Plush leatherette booths line the restaurant's perimeter, while communal high-tops run down the center. Splashy murals add personality to the space.

What dish represents the restaurant, and why? El Cristalazo (\$25), lime- and chili-marinated shrimp and pen shell clams served in an oversized martini glass, is a real showstopper that's fit to feed three or four. Add a pinch of chiltepin pepper to up the spice quotient — be judicious here because a little goes a long way.

Rounding out the menu are classic and unexpected hot and cold *botanas* or “snacks” such as marlin tacos, two kinds of burgers, and plenty of head-on, shell-on shrimp preparations.

Runner up: The *momias* (\$14), bacon-wrapped shrimp straddling a cocktail weenie that resemble miniature mummies, hence their name. Think: Finger food meets pub grub meets down-home surf and turf.

Who's at the next table? Cristal Vargas built a loyal following during the year she spent slinging seafood illicitly from her backyard in La Puente. Tables are packed, especially on weekends, with old and new fans — word travels fast among the local *mariscos*-appreciating set.

Appropriate for: Seafood-savvy diners who can stand a little heat.

Uh-oh: Battling weekend crowds can be intense, especially without a designated waiting area. Make your way past the huddle of hungry folks by the entrance to add your name to the list.

Service: Fuchsia-lipsticked ladies with big smiles and genuine warmth.

What are you drinking? Those under 21 (and some others too) have fruity *aguas frescas* served in extra-large Mason jars. Those of drinking age can go for the boozy *Micheladas* (spice- and lime-spiked beer) and *chavelas* (beer fortified with tomato juice, hot sauce and baby clams and garnished with celery, salt, and head-on shrimp).

Info: 1665 North Hacienda Blvd., La Puente, (626) 918-0863, mariscoselcristalazo.com. Open 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Sunday to Thursday; 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Friday and Saturday.

Copyright © 2016, Los Angeles Times