

From Guanajuato with love

FOUAD EGBARIA, Editor

For the monolingual, have no fear: freshness rolls off the tongue just the same in every language.

With that being the case, Margarita Challenger, owner of Glencoe's Guanajuato (pronounced "juan-a-wot-to"), is a culinary translator. A resident of Long Grove, she is a trained chef by trade, and has offered up Mexican cuisine that dances with freshness and color since 2008.

She graduated from the Washburne Culinary Institute in Chicago, after which she did catering work with some of her peers. She then took to taking care of her four kids, but was eventually approached by a friend about the idea of opening up a restaurant. Others advised her against it, because of the state of the economy at the time.

Six years later, it was clearly a risk worth taking.

The restaurant, named after the central Mexican state in which Challenger grew up, reflects her journey, both literal and culinary. She grew up walking to the markets, where she would go to buy live chickens and other fresh ingredients.

When asked what defines her restaurant, her answer was no surprise.

"Freshness," Challenger said. "Our food has a lot of love. I want to serve food that I would eat myself."

She doesn't use trans fats in her foods, and sticks to healthier cooking oils, such as olive, canola and corn oils. When she first started, she didn't accept the use of cheaper, in many cases "fake" ingredients, as using cheaper ingredients is less costly in the short term, but more costly down the road, health-wise.

GUANAJUATO

73 Green Bay Road,
Glencoe
(847) 242-0501
www.myguanajuato.com
Monday-Saturday, 11
a.m.-10 p.m.; Sunday,
4-10 p.m.

Challenger and her chefs use Amish chicken, poultry which isn't treated with hormones or antibiotics, which she said is "almost unheard of." They also use organic salmon, beans are boiled (as opposed to served from cans) and cook their own rice from scratch, blending tomatoes, garlic and onions with it, giving the rice that trademark orange hue, like a setting sun on your plate.

While it's difficult to get every ingredient locally, Challenger does her best to do so. She has an organic garden at her Long Grove home, where she grows arugula, cherry tomatoes, jalapenos and berries for the restaurant, the last of which she used in a Mixed Berry Margarita they featured this past summer.

A home garden is not always enough to supply enough ingredients for everything, but every little bit makes a difference, she said.

"It's important what you put in your body," she said. "The whole energy that goes into it ... it's sort of a holistic approach to it. Everything matters, and it matters a lot."

When *The Winnetka Current* Editor April Dahlquist, *The Wilmette Beacon* Editor Joe Coughlin and I made our way to Guanajuato on a pleasant Thursday afternoon, Oct. 9, the food sang of the love and freshness of which Challenger spoke.

We tried the enchiladas poblanas (\$13.95, \$16.95 with melted cheese), the mihoacan grilled avocado and

shrimp (\$18.50) and El Molcajete (\$17.50 with chicken).

The enchiladas come with either three cheese, chicken or steak, drizzled with mole sauce and served with rice and beans, pickled onions and sesame seeds.

For those looking to the sea, the grilled avocados, stuffed with shrimp, are just the ticket. Served with a healthy selection of vegetables and Mexican rice, the avocado complements the shrimp, the meat of the sea.

The dish called El Molcajete, however, is almost as much presentation as it is flavor. A choice of chicken or steak (or a combination of the two) is simmered along with tangy grilled cactus, onions, black beans and salsa in a mixing stone, and comes garnished with cilantro, radishes and cotija cheese, converging together in a fiesta of flavor.

In addition, for those seeking a liquid complement, the restaurant offers a number of inventive margaritas, including a Spicy Blood Orange margarita (\$13) and a Skinny margarita (\$11), for those counting calories.

Then again, when flavors jump from a plate or a glass, calories become but a suggestion.

Whether she's making food at the restaurant or at home – where she said she enjoys making Chinese and Thai food – the joy of cooking is constant.

"When people eat the food and say 'This is incredible,' that's a nice thing," she said. "When somebody leaves happy, and they enjoy their food, that is something to look forward to."

RIGHT: The enchiladas poblanas (\$13.95) come with a bold mole sauce and is also served with sides of Mexican rice and beans.



Guanajuato's mihoacan grilled avocado (\$18.50) comes stuffed with shrimp and served with vegetables and Mexican rice. PHOTOS BY APRIL DAHLQUIST/22ND CENTURY MEDIA



The El Molcajete (\$17.50) dish includes a choice of meat simmered with grilled cactus, onion, black beans and salsa.

