

IX Tapa Cantina Photo by: Evans Vestal Ward

The gatekeeper

With the opening of IX Tapa Cantina, restaurateur Jack Huang plays both ends and the middle

By [Dan O'Heron](#) 03/04/2010

Restaurateur Jack Huang has become a hinge figure in the dining-out business in Old Pasadena. Long the owner of Villa SORRISO — the western gateway at Pasadena Avenue — he becomes the doorman of the eastern entrance to the neighborhood on Arroyo Parkway with the opening of his IX Tapa Cantina.

“Going back to my student days at UCLA, I started loving Mexican food,” said Huang, who also holds the keys to Bar Celona, the popular Old Pasadena restaurant on Colorado Boulevard. “We used to gang up in Westwood and drive over to El Tepeyac Café in East LA and feast on giant Hollenbeck burritos, ergo my appetite to buy a Mexican restaurant.”

But wasn't it risky to wait until the middle of the recession in October 2009 to purchase Fred's Mexican Café? Didn't the “I'm nobody's fool” inner voice caution against it? Perhaps. But it was overruled by the inner voice of his actuary: “It told me it's a deal you can't refuse.”

Omitting financial details, Huang said he jumped on the deal to get in early for the Rose Parade and Rose Bowl college football game, followed a week later by the BCS Championship Game between the Alabama Crimson Tide and the Texas Longhorns. At noon that day, said Huang, some 150 Alabama fans trooped in and spent hours right up to game time drinking watermelon margaritas, which are never poured in Tuscaloosa, and feasting on seafood like tilapia, which is not found in Mobile Bay.

The drink, highlighting fine tequila, stirs watermelon, fresh basil leaves and lime juice, plus agave nectar and a mad dash of chile.

The other day, the drink was my goes-with-tilapia guzzle. Served with garlic shrimp and all the etceteras, the filet is grilled and marinated in a way that enhances the fish's special sweetness and low-fat fine texture (\$16). For a common fish, it's seafood filet mignon.

Another dish that draws whews: Pollo en mole poblano. A spicy reddish-brown sauce, its chocolate base contributes richness to the chicken without adding the usual frontline blast of cloying sweetness (\$13). Roasting and toasting a blend of varietal chiles and seeds, it reflects preparation in excruciating detail.

Around me at dinner, I could see many trays of fajitas (\$11 to \$16) moving across the room and spotted more than one colorful plate of grilled seafood salad. While fine restaurants charge \$15 and up for a salad with only one type of seafood, IX Tapa's creel overflows with three — shrimp, scallops and calamari — for \$11.

For lunch, most specials, including Mexican sandwiches with house salads, are less than \$10; for happy hour, including a Mexican shrimp cocktail, they're less than \$3.50.

While some of the recipes, such as the mole chicken and the fish tacos, may derive from the namesake city of Ixtapa or its neighbor, Acapulco, both La Costa Grande Pacific beachfront resorts in the southern state of Guerrero, I rate its kitchen as contemporary Mex-Mex. It's not lard-laden Tex-Mex, nor Cal-Mex with French/Asian fusions like duck confit in a sweet tamale with lemongrass. Nor is it restaurant-next-door Mex, where pinto beans smooch together with other foods, getting all over each other like wet leaves.

IX Tapa is an urban cantina, polished in its design by an especial suavity and agreeableness. Completely remodeled from a design by Sat Garg, the innovator who fashioned Villa SORRISO for Huang, the meandering rooms offer something inviting for most guests. For the sports fan, the main floor bar with dozens of strategically placed HDTVs offers a great new way of looking at things. This is in sharp contrast to Barney's Beanery next door, where viewers are distracted by garish ornaments around the screens and the noise level of a state hospital on Saturday night.

A lighting system in another bar upstairs radiates libidinous promise. Flashing red rays against iron-encased support beams, it's the closest thing man can make of light without burning the air. But then it blinks a simmering-down green. On weekends, dancing holds sway. Under such a play of light, I wonder how good my routine of convulsing hands and arms, ending with a switchblade kick, will look.

Tucked between floors of the 7,000 square-foot structure, there's an intimate and contained mezzanine lounge for private parties.

Having taken down all the ornament leftovers from Fred's, Garg has created an open and airy space. Someone looking in on the place will definitely want to come inside.

I'll be coming in again on March 17, St. Patrick's Day. There aren't any decent Irish bars in Pasadena anymore. But there's plenty of green in guacamole. But first I'll down a gallon of Guinness: A good Irishman never eats on an empty stomach.

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