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V FOR VENDETTA GETS A 'G' FOR GOD-AWFUL

YOU ASKED, SO WE TOLD YOU

The Dish

Superior rating

New Cocina offers all new taste of Tex Mex with Louisiana flavor

food **BROOKE MICHAEL**

As soon as you move through the glass doors of Cocina Superior, you'll know it's like no other Mexican restaurant in Birmingham. In fact, you won't feel like you're in Birmingham at all. The first sip of a pomegranate margarita will promptly transport you to a hip, contemporary restaurant in a city like Austin, New York City, Miami or even L.A. And when you taste their char-grilled oysters, topped with garlic butter and queso and served with hot bread and pico de gallo, you will feel simply out of this world.

When you take four Superior Grill restaurants and cross them with a high-end steakhouse in Shreveport, Louisiana, you get the most recent brainchild of three restaurateurs: Cocina Superior.

Gabe Garza, Cocina's managing partner, explains that he and his two partners, Phil Barbaree and Bob Kirchoff, decided to take traditional Mexican food, add more seafood dishes and present the results in a refreshing environment. This is where modern Tex Mex, and their newest restaurant concept, was born.

"Everybody who does Mexican food does the same thing," Garza says. "It's border Mexico style like Superior Grill or mom-and-pop, hole-in-the-wall style Mexican food. We wanted to do Mexican food a new way and saw an opportunity to do so."

"This gave us a lot of latitude in all aspects, from the design and feel of the space to the design and feel of the food and the drinks," Garza says.

The Brookwood Village space that houses the restaurant was totally transformed by Chicago-based designer Mark Knauer of Knauer, Inc. Glazed glass and stainless steel dramatically play off of warm woods and leathers, while palm trees, glass tile mosaics and plenty of plasma TVs add laid-back fun to the elegant atmosphere. The result is an open space with crisp lines — quite unlike the building's former feeling. A large patio, which lines two sides of the restaurant and utilizes garage doors that open and close when weather permits, offers plenty of year-round al fresco dining.

A touch of Louisiana

Cocina Superior actually has an even greater tie to the state of Louisiana than its sister restaurants. The executive chef, Jess Bourgeois, along with 11 other restaurant employees, took jobs at Cocina Superior after the destruction of Hur-



EXECUTIVE CHEF JESS BOURGEOIS and 11 other Cocina Superior employees took jobs at the new Birmingham restaurant after the destruction of Hurricane Katrina forced them out of New Orleans.

ricane Katrina forced them from the Crescent City.

Bourgeois, a former chef at the still-closed Commander's Palace, turned to family friend Chris Escobar, who also happened to be the general manager Baton Rouge's Superior Grill, for employment ideas. Escobar put Bourgeois in touch with Garza, and Bourgeois and his wife, Erin, soon relocated to Birmingham to start anew.

Four days after Katrina devastated New Orleans, Garza and his management staff traveled to Louisiana, found a U-haul and went from house to house gathering the belongings of some of their Superior Grill employees. They brought their

employees to Birmingham, found them apartments and put them to work at Cocina Superior, which was still five months from opening. Although half a dozen employees have returned to Superior Grill in New Orleans, five are still at Cocina Superior — one makes margaritas, one mans the grill, one cooks and two prep food each day.

"We truly appreciate the work they do for us," Garza says. "Without them, the Superior Grills and Cocina Superior couldn't be what they are."

Drinks and eats

The menu at Cocina Superior does a great job introducing adventurous eaters to no-so-familiar ingredients such as jicama, a root vegetable with a sweet, nutty flavor; and Oaxacan mole (pronounced mo-lay), a spicy Mexican sauce.

And several selections will appeal to those who don't — sigh — crave Mexican food on a bi-weekly basis like I do. Menu standouts include the tequila-lime salmon served atop greens with jicama, queso fresco and a honey and lime vinaigrette; fall-apart, melt-in-your-mouth brisket quesadillas; chicken enchiladas in homemade spinach tortillas; pollo tropical, skewers of pineapple and pomegranate glazed chicken breast served with mango pico; and traditional, made-from-scratch pork tamales.

And no matter how you like your margaritas, you'll find one here to please your tequila taste buds. You can take them martini-style, on the rocks, frozen, with salt, without salt, swirled with sangria, and made with either fresh lime, pomegranate, mango, prickly pear or strawberry. The drink menu also features specialty cocktails such as a frozen mojito, Monsoon, Mexican Mai Tai, Papi's Pina Colada, Superior Mary and fresh fruit sangria as well as an extensive selection of beer and tequilas.

Still, the best part of Cocina Superior is that when you've finished your margarita and cleaned your plate, you're in Birmingham and just a short drive from home.

Cocina Superior is located at 587 Brookwood Village in Homewood. They serve food from 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Sunday through Thursday and from 11 a.m.-11 p.m. on Friday and Saturday. Brunch is served from 9 a.m. until 2 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday. For more information, call 259-1980 or visit www.thecocinasuperior.com