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## Aztecas is a welcome addition

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Now that's more like it.

I'm thinking these words (and simultaneously chewing with approval) as I try the carnitas at Aztecas Mexican Grill & Cantina, which opened this past spring in the old Tapestries space in northwest Reno.

On my first visit, the carnitas that filled a taco were tender and porky, but they lacked those essential feathery-crisp edges, and grated yellow cheese ruined the mood. (The cheese, which would never appear on a traditional taco, immediately told me that Aztecas isn't serving deeply authentic food.)

But this afternoon, I order the carnitas plate, and chunks of meat shred beneath my fork. The pork is tender on the inside, crisp and browned on the outside. Finally, the carnitas at Aztecas live up to their brethren at Los Altos, the longtime Truckee favorite owned by the family that owns Aztecas. Guacamole and sour cream, held at bay in a tortilla cup, are superfluous here, and it would be a crime to inflict them on the excellent flavor and texture of the carnitas.

Starters also are improved. A generously portioned bowl

of tortilla soup arrives with batons of fried tortilla emerging from a broth brimming with cubed avocado and queso blanco. As the strips soften, I push them into the gently spicy broth. The soup is much preferable to an oily cheese and chorizo dip that began one early meal.

Beef flautas are simply dry, but chile verde puzzles me. I like the spicy braised pork -- once I locate it beneath a blanket of sour cream and a coverlet of flour tortillas. Why is the meat served already bundled, like an enchilada? It would be better (and more typical) to let the stew speak for itself and serve warm tortillas only as an accompaniment.

The thinking behind the Baja wrap is clearer and more successful. Seared cod is tossed with a creamy (almost green goddess-y) salad of cabbage, cilantro and green onions and then wrapped in a garlic and herb tortilla. The herbs and the cilantro lighten the richness of the sauce, and fish wraps are much easier to eat than fish tacos, which always seem to fall apart.

Kicky salsa verde strikes the right pose between loose and overly chunky; it's a highlight of every meal.

Aztecas has two dining rooms garnished with Mexican art. My favorite room features a tinkling fountain with a pounded metal parrot perched alongside. The bar, also roomy, offers accomplished margaritas and an excellent selection of tequilas (try anything by Partida, a craft, family-owned maker). A short tutorial on the menu reminds diners that true tequila (not the college-bar junk) is meant to be appreciated for its bouquet and flavors.

Aztecas stumbled a bit at first, but its attractiveness and sincerity were never in doubt, and the restaurant is now hitting its stride. It's a welcome and much needed addition to the neighborhood.



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A carnitas taco, left, and a chicken tostada are among the menu items at Aztecas Mexican Grill & Cantina on Robb Drive. The family that owns Aztecas also owns Los Altos, a longtime Truckee restaurant.