

Casa Latte's wrap features north-south fusion

Tom Wilkowske, Duluth News Tribune

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Erin Virta recalled the first time she stepped into Casa Latte, about a year ago, and how it took her back even further — to her college studies in Mexico City.

More than the menu, it was the little things that reminded her of Mexico, things like the soap opera on the television and the accordion-laced music on the stereo. For lunch, she had a decidedly Northland-flavored dish — a chicken wild rice wrap. Then she discovered the horchata, a traditional, sweet-and-milky Latin beverage similar to chai tea. “I almost felt like I was back in Mexico,” she said.

Since then, Virta has sampled much of Casa Latte's menu, but the chicken wild rice wrap remains a favorite. It's “a creamy combination of wild rice with chunks of chicken, cranberries and, unexpectedly, cashews. If there was a burrito/wrap inspired by the area, I'm certain it would be like this,” she wrote in an e-mail.

Casa Latte on U.S. Highway 53 in Hermantown is a handy workday lunch stop for Virta, who works at nearby Cirrus Design, so that's when we decided to dine. It was the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, and by 12:30 p.m., traffic was looking heavier than usual.

We placed our orders for chicken wild rice wraps and opted for the soft chairs clustered around a trunk-coffee table near the fireplace (alas, not a real one).

When our sandwiches arrived, Virta sampled hers. “I like it because it's a good combination of ingredients, although I haven't gotten a cashew yet,” she said. (At first, the nuts were a surprise, but now she looks forward to them.) “And it's almost like a soup and a salad feel at the same time.”

TOM'S TAKE

Among the hearty eaters out there, wraps sometimes have a bad rap (pun intended) as being all salad, no substance. This chicken wild rice wrap is something of a hybrid. It had little, if any, lettuce. It was filled with just-done wild rice, a generous amount of chicken chunks and a smattering of dried cranberries and cashews, all tossed in a slightly tangy white sauce. It was not too dry, not too wet. It wasn't overly large — about 7 inches long, 3 inches wide, 1½ inches thick — but plenty filling, especially when accompanied by kettle chips and horchata.

It's important to note that the chicken wild rice wrap is a regular Wednesday menu item; wrap selections vary daily.

A word or three about the horchata: It's a milky, sweet, chai-like drink common in Latin America and Spain, where it's strictly regulated and labeled, like wine, according to the quality and region where it's produced.

Some horchata is made with almonds or other nuts and others, like this one, are made from rice. I first encountered it 20 years ago, when my wife and I honeymooned in Spain; there, it's served cold. This beverage, combined with tea, sweetened and served hot, is a nice option when you want something slightly creamy, but you've already reached your dairy quota for the day.

THE DISH

There's a good reason Virta thinks the chicken wild rice wrap is a sandwich that eats like a salad. It's because the filling is the very same chicken wild rice salad that's on the summer menu, according to restaurant owner Nicole Alvarez. Besides the named ingredients, it also includes sun-dried cranberries and cashews tossed in a cucumber dill sauce that's made from scratch, Alvarez said.

The shop usually has three or four wraps available each day; they're pre-assembled and grilled as they're ordered. Sandwiches are made to order.

Alvarez said her restaurant's goal is to offer fresh, mostly from-scratch dishes, or “a healthy alternative to fast food,” in a location that's just outside the Hermantown retail sprawl.

Besides sandwiches, the menu also includes pastries, assorted specialty and energy drinks and numerous flavors of gelato, which is made on site from mixes provided by a Michigan supplier; and a full line of coffee drinks (PT Coffee out of Kansas City).

TOM WILKOWSKE is a food reviewer for the Wave. Reach him at atablefortwo@duluthnews.com.