

LA PARRILLA MAKES A NAME FOR ITSELF

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Less than a mile from Los Ranchos, Dade's County's best-known Nicaraguan restaurant, is La Parrilla, a Nicaraguan eatery that isn't as famous, though it's anything but ordinary.

Hidden in the Park Hill Plaza, the restaurant, located at 9611 W. Flagler St., accommodates 150. Despite the size, service is akin to the poshest French restaurant. Busboys cruise by tables, replenishing water or sweeping away crumbs.

Like Los Ranchos' owners, La Parrilla's owner Gustavo Medina had close ties dictator Anastasio Somoza, having been a major-general until 1979 when Somoza was ousted. Medina had had no restaurant experience when he lived in Managua, but he said he turned to grilling Nicaraguan food a year after he arrived because, "like other Nicaraguans, I had to make a living."

"It was my idea that a restaurant was a good idea, anyway," he explained. "Also, there were a lot of us here, enough to support a restaurant."

The restaurant's name, which translates to "the grill," provides the clue to La Parrilla's popularity: the grilled beef. The house specialty is churrasco, a tenderloin steak that melts in the mouth. The chef, Ricardo Gonzalez, an Argentine who lived many years in Nicaragua, explained that the secret of the churrasco is that the meat is marinated for 24 hours.

The steak, tender enough to give way to a butter knife, is invariably served with three sauces: spicy onion, a slightly sweet tomato one and garlicky herb. A half-churrasco (\$10.25) is a hearty luncheon portion.

A similar, but smaller and less expensive steak for lunch is the puntas jalapena ejecutivo (\$6.95). The tenderloin tip is served with a fiery white sauce, but the waiter also provides the savory three sauces.

Chilaquiles (\$5.95), a Mexican-influenced dish of shredded chicken, two cheeses, ranchero sauce and tortilla chips, provides a fine lunch for those fond of Mexican food but not its traditional piquancy.

Portions on the beef entrees are large, while seafood portions are moderate. The shrimp thermidor is creamy and delicious, but brings a mere half-dozen shrimp swimming in the sauce. At \$12.50, the portion is, well, shrumpy.

All entrees are accompanied by gallo pinto, which is Nicaragua's staple rice-and-red-bean dish, and fried ripe plantains and banana chips.

For light lunches, La Parrilla serves appetizers called antojitos, "whims," which range from \$1.95 to \$4.50, and include deep-fried cheese, fried beans with cream and a seafood cocktail. Unlike the food at Cuban restaurants, some of the dishes, such as the pargo a la Tipitapa (\$9.95), snapper in a Creole sauce, are quite spicy, so it's safest to ask first.

On Monday, the restaurant seemed to be deserted until nearly 1 p.m., when late-eating Latins strolled in for a bite. La Parrilla might be a good alternative to other restaurants that are packed between noon and 1 p.m.

Despite the proximity of Fontainebleau Park, the apartment complex that so reminds Nicaraguans of the Open Tres apartments in their native Managua, La Parrilla customers are primarily Cuban, Medina said.

"The Cubans, our compatriots in exile, also are very fond of Nicaraguan food," Medina said.

Like other Nicaraguan restaurants, La Parrilla lists tres leches, a cake dessert drenched in evaporated, condensed and whole milk. Although the exquisitely light meringue topping makes tres leches look suspiciously like it's rock-candy sweet, the traditional Nicaraguan dessert is only moderately so.

The tres leches, the obligatory ending to a fine meal, costs \$2.75.

La Parrilla, 9611 W. Flagler St.

Lunch hours: 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m., Monday through Friday

All major credit cards accepted. Checks accepted from regular customers.