

Gastronomic San Carlos

By Chris Edmonson

On a recent trip to San Carlos Rex and I had the usual discussions every day about where we were going to eat for each meal. Ever since I can recall this ritual involves surprises and wishful thinking but primarily it is about the mood of the day. Many of the places I am about to bring up are places I won't go back to (as you will see) but I keep them in the lexicon because it's part of the art form to, "Never say never".

At the top of the list only because it is the first place you pass on the way into San Carlos and the last one on the way out is the restaurant at **Pilar**. It has been a while since I have eaten there primarily because it is out of the way and, frankly, doesn't offer the ambiance that it should given the great location by the beach. The food was never as good as expected and although the wait staff is superb the place just never quite found a position in my regular haunts. A ways further on there is **Champs** and it has the spotty history of sometimes not existing. While I have had some great meals there that was quite a time ago and I haven't been back to check for several years now. When I first encountered it **Champs** was the original Sports Book (back before that moved to the **Fiesta**) and the steak/shrimp dinner was incredible and inexpensive. The setting was very good since there was a large window facing the bay and the architecture was interesting in addition to being a nice walk from the **Fiesta** which is where I used to stay most of the time.

That brings us to what is now the **Fiesta Real**. For political reasons I have sworn off of the place due to having been abused by the new owners a few years ago when the club still had its Sunday dinner there for the regattas. The problem with that decision is that they have gotten a really good chef there and the meals are quite good now whereas they were previously just adequate. They also have better views there now with service and beach close at hand. A real dilemma, that!! Long live the revolution!!

One of the newer places just a little further in is the **Mexico Gourmet**. This is a school created to teach kids from Guaymas a little something about the tourist industry. The fun thing here is that they follow a very different serving pattern and have dishes that are prepared at the table and flammable. It's a lot of fun to interact with the young staff and their enthusiasm is infectious. The service is

sometimes a little slow but the dishes are interesting and despite the small size of the venue it is well worth a visit. Just a few steps away is the place I have not figured out if it is called the **Tetakawi**, the Best Western restaurant or what? There is not too much I can say because I have yet to eat there and I see it with people in it much of the time so have assumed it had some sort of attraction even if it is only that it is next to the hotel. One good thing is that it is a few paces closer to the **Thrifty** where you can pick up a good helado (ice cream) after dinner. Then pop across the street and you find **Charlie's Rock**. This is beyond a doubt one of the best sunset views anywhere in town. Often times I have started my evening there with a shrimp cocktail and drink at the long bar facing seaward. The one problem unsolved here is that this is among the picks for worst parking arrangement. It is hard to enjoy a place if you can't get to it.

Crossing back to the north side of the street (Manlio Fabio Beltrones Blvd) is the inevitable and unavoidable **Froggy's**. If you spend any time in S.C. you will wander into **Froggy's** because that is where the music is. This is not, strictly speaking, a restaurant but I have had a pizza or burger there many times while I am pummeled by the karaoke or a local band (one of the places you will occasionally see Mark Mulligan). Usually crowded and noisy it's just what the doctor ordered if you want to get in the middle of it all. Cross the street again and you are at **Picalo**. This is one of the places that you can instantly be abused if that is to your liking. It is Italian food with an attitude. The owner's disdain for many things, including lesser attire, moving her tables around or laughter have put it off my list for a bit but the food is usually quite good and the staff is very solicitous once you run the gamut of the owner's mood swings. I can only shudder thinking of the time I got off the boat after a race day and went there quickly to find that owner was not going to seat me because I was wearing sandals, shorts and a T-shirt. I believe Rex has a similar story of curtailed jocularity.

Just a little further on you come to **Rosas**. This is standard Mexican fare in a sterile environment. The best meal you can do here is probably breakfast but I have to add that this a very clean place where I have no issues with what can be eaten. It's a little confusing in that this place is not totally certain if it's fast food or what. I like the place but don't eat there often... others have objections for a variety of reasons but most agree it's just plain and that keeps it off the most likely for dinner list. Back to the north side and you will encounter **Jax Snax**. Here is a restaurant that is very straight forward as a semi-fast food Americanized source of grits and the best parking

is around the rear rather than off the street front. It must be said too that in summer the air conditioning is sub-zero quality! Going back across the street to **Bananas** has become a favored stop in the last few years. By diligent comparison it has become known that **Bananas** has the best flan in town. It used to be that I would drop my kids off there in the afternoons and come back later to pick them up none the worse for wear. Since then the ownership changed and the additions of music and excellent wait staff has made this a good place to find a meal or just drink while watching the panoply of S.C. life play out for an evening or two. It has been said that the last time Rex and I were there we drank them out of Bohemia's and Doris (the very animated bar maid/waitress) couldn't find another for us anywhere in San Carlos. In our defense it did take us three days to accomplish such a feat.

Upstairs from there is the **Paradise Bar** which has a couple of pool tables if you are a refugee from **Froggy's** one table and later at night has a band. This is just a bar but it does have a plus by having a balcony to watch life go by on the street below and adjust your attitude for a spell. Below that is **Pasta Fasta**. This has recently turned out to be a personal favorite for a couple of reasons. It is where to get take out pizza and the Italian dishes rival the Other Italian place. It's definitely not fancy but when I am down there for longer periods I find myself drawn back almost once a week to retreat momentarily from stock Mexican food. **El Gallo** is an interesting place that the club may be introduced to soon depending on Len's negotiations. With its artsy ambiance and outdoor venue the good food just tops it off. It is under new management and has a history of being a nice place with sometimes music. Across the way there is the **Pollo Feliz** (Happy Chicken) and it has what any franchise in Tucson has and no beer. That's a plus and a minus. You can bring in your own drink if you like but it's really a fast food chicken place with a good dinner for less.

Crossing to the playa side again you will come to **La Gran Torta**. Here is a good burger (usually) and an established barbeque for tacos. It's okay but now that **JJ** moved in next door I don't think I will frequent it as often. **JJ's** is my ultimate place in San Carlos because over the years I have become good friends with **JJ**. He used to be a waiter at the **Fiesta** and then later at **Pilar**. I have watched his family grow up and he mine. He's a friend to everyone who ever came in there and his latest iteration is the best so far (yes, he has moved again). He has Tacos, Hot Dogs and an expanded menu (try the Shrimp Ball soup!!) and you just cannot do better than this open air

restaurant with rude T-shirts and tobacco sales!! The prices are Cruiser's Budget low so you just can't go wrong here. **JJ** (Juan Jose) is a treat as a human being and no trip to S.C. is complete for me without at least one stop there. He currently does not have a liquor license (again) but the Extra deposito is just a short walk down the street. If you ask nicely **JJ** will provide a cup for your beer and, if you invite him, will sometimes bring a glass for himself (leche de madre, as he sometimes says). It's easy to identify **JJ** by following the, "Who cares? Nobody!"

Once again crossing the street you will come to a well known and established place... **Blackies**. Here is where the wait staff from the former **Fiesta** has migrated so if you have been coming down for a while you will see familiar faces. The menu is excellent although a bit pricy it offers ambiance, very competent staff and good food. The guy behind the bar, Armando, is a long time friend as well as my wife's S.C. boyfriend and they threaten to elope each time we go down. Even if we don't have dinner there it is one stop we make if we are there to get the latest on Armando's sense of humor. You may notice that I skipped a couple of places in getting to **Blackies**. One is the new **Pizza place** behind the older Pemex that I have yet to hear much good about but have not tried and the other is a place with a clever sign that is clearly a breakfast internet café. Next trip or so I intend to try the café and see if the scones live up to the sign (**@ & picture of mug**).

Somewhere in here I believe is the **Heaven's Door**. This upscale restaurant has had very good comments from everyone I know who has gone in. My issue here is that I need to remember to pack better clothes to pop in and test the place for myself. My standard wrinkled t-shirt and shorts just won't do. When I have looked inside as I pass at night it is clear that the clientele dress for dinner. I will pass over all the stuff that may have found a home in the plaza with the 1910 Club and bowling alley because there has been a rapid fire turn over there and it seems to be a jinxed location for now.

One place I would skip if it didn't merit a warning label would be the one I call **Diner Food** (I don't know what the name actually is). It is where you can find Grandpa wandering through in his pajamas and sometimes a challenge to find a seat when the tourist bus offloads. It's a sloppy Joe/white bread sort of affair that I can only describe as 1950's diner food. It's a gamble at best and while I have had a few good meals there you just never know what you're going to run into.

Finally we are to the best addition to the list in years!!! **La Palapa** is near the old La Posada that has recently undergone a renovation to luxury condos. **La Palapa** is comida Griega (Greek fare)!!! Aside from bringing the owner to tears if you ask for Retsina to go with your meal you will find excellent staff and awesome dinners. This is a fantastic sunset view across the bay toward Miramar and on our last visit Rex and I had roast lamb with a Greek salad that was superb. Yes, the lamb was prepared on a spit over an open barbeque!

Further along on this tour you will find the **San Carlos Grill** and my personal opinion leans toward risk avoidance due to the severe illnesses I have gotten into on more than one occasion there. The nickel-and-dime-you-to-death issues with the exchange rate and the lack of interesting menu keep me from going back. Besides there are such many much better places than this to spend your time. Toward the marina basin there is, of course, **Barracuda Bob's**. This is a great place open until 2:00 p.m. every day. The owner, Jan, is just such great people. The place runs like a clock and has been a real supporter of the club's activities over the long haul. Many of you already know Iram from his boat cleaning business or his sailing classes and his regular job at **Barracuda Bob's** has this place at the top of the friendly list. Around the corner is the **Marina Cantina** now under new ownership. The menu has not changed and the same items you have always liked are still there. Some of the staff has changed but it's still a preferred place to hang out. Walking around the basin you come to the restaurant that I tend associate with the **Marina Terra** hotel. The menu is pretty standard Mexican food and the sea based stuff is pretty good. I have gotten away from eating there mostly because I want to get out and see more than the marina but if you need a place to hang while you are waiting for the sun to go down you could certainly do worse than this. Up the hill and across the street is **Evie's** which has really improved over the last few years. Mostly I attribute this to Martín (Marteen) taking over from the previous owners (Jack & Evie) and upgrading the services. It's good for breakfast and lunch and they have an expanded dinner menu with a balcony view. The parking is limited unless you are already at the marina and walk across. New and soon (maybe) to open is the **Captain's Club**. Stopping in there this last trip we heard what we have heard for the last year... there is a problem with the permits. In any case, it is a nice looking interior and with luck they will navigate officialdom successfully and get the restaurant/bar open soon. The place everyone knows soon after they get to San Carlos is **Tequilas**. Here is a raucous bar at night that does very well for breakfast. It's not a swell place for dinner only because it can get pretty rowdy in

there if you get a late start but it's close to the marina and you can't go too far wrong (if you don't have transportation) to just hang out and watch the proceedings.

Backing up a bit toward the **San Carlos Grill** you come to the small area between the Tienda (store) and the church. Here is the **Buen Café** and it is a great place for a burger or sandwich. Breakfasts are good too and the atmosphere can be just the thing for a lazy morning. Also you will find the **Taco Stand** in front of the deposito to be a staple if you are ever there for an extended time. The tacos are good and the price is right.

If you venture further west out toward the Bahia you will pass the **Esterito** (related to Esterito II back toward town but this is the place with the view). This is the restaurant that has the pangas parked out back on the estuary. They don't often have a big crowd which has been a real mystery to me for a long time. If you want Chocolates (clams) or Oysters here is the place. In fact, pretty much any sea food (dorado, cabrilla or whatever) they have will be fresh and well prepared. It has reasonably good parking and can accommodate a larger crowd. If you follow the Bahia toward the west you eventually come to the Marina Real which it has been said is opening a new place called the **Oasis**. That would be a welcomed addition to the list because there aren't as many hangouts on that side of the mountain.

Of course we are all familiar with the **Plaza San Carlos**. Definitely an upscale venue with a fantastic sunset view. Many of us recall the green flash a while ago for one of the regatta awards night parties. This can be a great beach to hang out on as well as the sunset view.

Last on the list and with recognition that I have skipped a few places is what we have come to call **The Restaurant at the End of the World**. There may even be a sign now but for the life of me I cannot remember what it says. To get there you drive out a lot of dirt road past the Paradiso Hotel through the fish camp called La Manga following the small bay. Here is where you will find a sunset view back toward the Tetas de Cabra and a restaurant that has a flavor to it that is pure Mexico. Great sea foods of all sorts along with a spontaneous owner make the place work. It's best not to overwhelm this one with a too huge crowd and you want to bring your drinks if you are inclined toward anything other than soda pop but if you can be there just before sunset you could be in for a real treat. Timing is everything and you want to be ready to leave when the generator comes on.

Like so many things in life there is more to discover when you are in San Carlos but this list will be a good starting point to that pre-meal discussion about where do YOU want to go?