

Expect More, Get Less

By: Jonah Helbling

I'm not sure why I set my expectations so high, maybe because I thought going to a well established restaurant that has been around since 1975 couldn't possibly be a bad experience. Welcome to Chili's Grill and Bar located at 3104 Plank Road in Fredericksburg, Virginia home of the crackheads and garbage first impressions. It all started when my mother gifted me a \$15 gift card to Chilis, and I decided to go out with a few friends on a Wednesday night. It was 7:30 P.M. and the three of us drove into the heart of the Central Park area to find a sad, empty parking lot festering with weeds and barely enough light. The air was brisk and the wind was chilling to the skin, so we hastily entered the restaurant expecting a warm greeting.

First Impressions

Once inside we waited at what we thought was the front desk –there was no real way to tell– so we stood for a minute, or two, or three, and we kept waiting until finally a nice young woman from the back came up and greeted us. After contemplating where to seat us, she eventually came to the conclusion that it would be best to sit us directly next to the only other group in the restaurant. About five minutes later our server came by and asked what we would like to drink. This is where crackhead comes into play from the intro, the waitress was high on “life” and although seemed kind, she looked and acted completely out of it. We proceeded to order three waters and three margaritas; all of which came out at the exact same time just eight minutes later. The waters had ice, but absolutely zero chill to them and tasted like they were straight from the tap. The margaritas were presented in a standard glass cup and the salty rim was

messy and left salt oozing down the edges of the glass. The taste was nearly all mixer and no tequila, which in combination with the runny salt, created a watered down tart, sweet, and salty mixture that made it difficult to drink.

Restaurant Feel

As we were waiting for our server to come back and take our order I had some time to observe our surroundings and I noticed there weren't just a few crumbs or particles of trash on the ground, but it was visibly grimy. As if the place had not been swept or moped in two days, and on top of that our tables were so sticky it felt like a thin layer of super glue was applied before we sat down. This location was clearly dilapidated and lacked proper management care. The good news is the server came back to take our order before I had too much time to look around. I will say that Chilis has a great menu with lots of different ethnic options. Including, but not limited to Hispanic dishes, seafood dishes, classic American burgers, chicken dishes, and Italian dishes. For some, the amount of choices might be overbearing and hard to pick from, but for families this might be a catch all solution to a family dinner out.

Food Orders

My crew and I weren't able to try everything but we fell into a nice range of flavor. We ordered; the crispy chicken sandwich with a side of fries; the seafood protein bowl; the cheddar bacon, chicken quesadilla with a Caesar salad side; and their bottomless chips with a choice of three different sauces out of five. This is where it gets interesting, so to start us off the chips were thin, unpleasantly crunchy, and tasted like the top came off the salt shaker and doused our chips beyond recovery. For our saucy sides we went with guacamole, white queso, and salsa. The guacamole was scooped, not stirred and was already browning when set on the table. I took a

salty chip and cut into the ball of guacamole and when I ate this iconic duo, for the first time ever I wanted to spit it out because the guac was so flavorless and the chip so crunchless I thought I had bitten into a piece of soggy cardboard. Now I don't often get queso because it's so heavily filling, but it does pair nicely with most hispanic meals and definitely with chips. When I dove into the queso it was hot and melty which is exactly what you want out of queso, so that was a good sign, but now for the real test; taste. It wasn't too cheesy and however they made it, it was able to offset at least that one chip. It was stirred to a smooth viscosity that held its shape with a slow drip and had a wonderful flavor combo. Then BAM! Just like that we are back to another disgraceful attempt at another dip. The salsa ran off my chip like water rushes through a gutter during a storm, it was nearly impossible to get a mouth full it was so liquidy and when I did get to taste it the spice overcame the other flavors in a good salsa. That's a loss in my book.

The Presentation

Our main meals came out with great timing and were still hot which is a surprise given our experience up to that point. Although, the server just sort of threw the plates down and left us to properly distribute them which I found odd. The crispy chicken sandwich was exactly what it advertised, two buns toasted to a crisp brown exterior and soft inside enveloped a large fried and flakey chicken breast. Inside this sandwich lie bright green shredded lettuce, a few crunchy pickles, and the chicken is topped with Chili's special sweet chili sauce. However, for every winner, there's a loser and this loser was the side of fries. The fries may as well have been pulled off the last customer's plate and reserved to me. They were dry, cold, soft and the texture of them was similar to chewing on the same piece of gum for way too long. The quesadilla was able to redeem Chilis to some extent, its roasted outer shell packed with melted cheese, bits of bacon,

and thick juicy chunks of chicken created a memorable blast of American Hispanic flavor. The caesar salad that came on the side was genuinely a great salad with fresh lettuce and crusted croutons, but the dressing was overdone and drowned out what could have been excellence. When the seafood power bowl found the right person it might have been the most balanced meal there. It featured a warm quinoa base, mixed with various vegetables, avocado, and topped with soft voluptuous shrimp that pop in your mouth. The hint of Old Bay seasoning in tandem with mixed vegetables and avocado created a savory taste that left your mouth watering.

Last Thoughts

All that said, the meals provided a hulking serving size and were more than enough to fill up one person. There are more than enough negative comments about Chilis in Fredericksburg, VA and only a few positive ones. If you're looking for more than enough platters to pick from and/or you have a large family outing then Chilis might be worth considering, but no promises on wait and preparation time. On the other hand, while I would not recommend this restaurant to first daters or anniversary outings, I will say this restaurant could be a unique change in scenery if you want an easy place to grab some quick drinks. The service was slow and the food was unpredictable. Cleanliness is not their strong suit and their hiring choices are a result of poor management and undesirability to work there. Their meals range from \$13.99 to \$21.99 and their dessert selection is limited to just three generic items. While their alcohol selection looks enticing, the prices are overvalued and the drinks underperform. Unless you're looking for some free entertainment, sub-par cocktails, and have nothing better to do, I would recommend trying something different and experiencing a restaurant that cares about their customer base.

