

In case you're not a frequent visitor to the area, here's a little recent history.

Last winter, the venerable Rudy's shut its doors, ending what had been a door-to-door duel with its neighbor to the north, La Fuente.

Across the street, La Perla is celebrating half a decade of steady business, especially in the summer when its back patio draws throngs of downtown diners who venture over the 6th St. Viaduct to choose a spicy lunch from its Mexican-American menu.

It's the next block that's even more interesting. Earlier this year, Hector Jimenez, owner of Azteca Restaurant, moved his operation across the street.

So one of La Perla's co-owners decided to open a second restaurant in Azteca's former home. That venture by Jaime Gonzalez and his wife, Martha, is Botanas.

What would make Gonzalez want to open a second restaurant?

"I grew up in the restaurant business," Gonzalez said. His father, the late Trinidad Gonzalez, owned restaurants in his home town of Guadalajara, and he began working in them at age 7.

"I love food....I've got a lot of recipes."

Gonzalez opened Botanas (a colloquial word for "snacks" in Mexico) as a place where he could introduce new dishes. One of those new dishes, Guadalajara mole coloradito (\$6.50), caught my eye on my first visit.

Far from being a simple sauce, Mexican moles are painstaking blends of ingredients that can range from fruits and vegetables to chiles, nuts, seeds and in some cases, bread crumbs.

The one most commonly served in Milwaukee, mole poblano, originated in the City of Puebla and contains chocolate. Farther to the south, in the Mexican state of Oaxaca, seven moles are made in colors that range from yellow to black.

But I'd never tasted a Guadalaran version before. In true Mexican tradition, the mole had been cooked separately from the chicken it covered and put on at the last moment. I knew it would be red from the word "coloradito", but I wasn't prepared for its rich and complex flavor, smooth texture and great body. Gonzalez told me that its ingredients included guajillo and ancho chiles, garlic, sesame seeds and flour that had been browned carefully in a skillet to mellow its flavor.

My lunch companion chose a more familiar entrée, a chile relleno (\$6.50), which was equally impressive. The poblano pepper had been roasted, filled with mild Mexican cheese, then dipped into a fluffy, soufflé-like batter and fried to a light gold. A dressing of spicy ranchero sauce covered it.

Both dishes were served with well-made beans, rice and tortillas and were so tasty that they made us want to come back for more.

Two more visits for dinner gave more opportunities to try more of Gonzalez's specialties. Among the best was bistek machacado (\$8.75) - a tender, chopped steak that had been first grilled over mesquite. It was topped with the house salsa borracha, a lively mix of red and green bell peppers, grilled onions, chopped cilantro, tomatoes, tequila and whisky. It

was good at dinner and the leftovers made an excellent sandwich at lunch the next day.

Pork tenderloin in green sauce (\$8.95) was a marvelously rich dish of sliced, grilled meat on a lively tomatillo-based sauce. We loaded the strips into warm flour tortillas and topped them with lettuce, tomatoes and chunky pico de gallo relish to make wonderful Mexican sandwiches.

We ate the beef fajitas (\$10.95) the same way and loved every bite. The beef strips had been marinated, sautéed with brown onions tomatoes and peppers then served with lettuce, tomato, jack cheese, guacamole, sour cream and more of that great Mexican relish.

I think our biggest and best surprise came in Pasta alla Mexicana (\$8.95), a south-of-border interpretation of an Italian dish. It began with perfectly cooked linguine, tossed with tender chunks of Mexican stewed chicken. But instead of an Italian meat sauce, the noodles were covered with spicy salsa ranchera, chopped jalapenos and melted cheese. The result was great, but it also was hot.

That tendency toward spicy sauces was one of the things I noticed about Botanas. Some dishes, especially the pasta and the relleno, were just at the border line of comfort for me.

Two other dishes left me a little flat. Tequila shrimp (\$13.50), served on a sizzling iron grill like the Fajitas, didn't taste completely fresh. The crab used in the crab cerviche (\$4.95) was the imitation variety. An enchilada, taco and chimichanga combination plate (\$6.95) was just average, and I wish my servers would have given me a choice of corn or flour tortillas instead of automatically bringing the flour.

But when it came to desserts (\$3), both flan and the Mexican cheesecake were excellent.

Like La Perla, Botanas had been nicely decorated. An elaborate mural by Juan Flores and Steve Draeger starts above the front window and wraps along the walls and ceilings, even into the bathrooms. And like La Perla, there's a lovely deck behind the building where a meal can be even more marvelous under a summer sky.

All in all, S. 5th St. is one restaurant better for the new Botanas. If you like Mexican food, don't miss this one.