

The *Determined Diner* Reports on Restaurants in Atenas

Every so often your culinary reporter, the *Determined Diner*, will write up an evaluation of various restaurants in and around Atenas. The object of this endeavor is to eat at lesser-known places and report the findings. The *Determined Diner* does not dine alone, nor does she critique alone. Conscientious volunteers are tasting, testing, and analyzing an amazing assortment of food all in the name of public service. We expect our research to last months, if not years. It's a tough job, but somebody has got to do it. This is *DD*'s first report, based on lunchtime visits.

Over the past month, four restaurants were sampled. The first, **Mejor Clima #1**, isn't much to look at, but we were very impressed with the food. Located near "Los Rayos", aka the Dollar Store, you might have walked right past it without even noticing it. Okay, the tables and chairs do look a little worn (maybe because of the popularity of the place?), but the service is friendly and prompt, and the menu offers a few things you don't usually see in Atenas. Like Avocado Stuffed with Shrimp. This arrived atop a small salad and was dressed with fresh lime juice. Very good and very reasonably priced: c1300. Alongside the salad I tried a cup of Chicken Soup. I have to say that this one of the best chicken soups I've ever tasted; the broth was incredibly rich. My dining partner had a Gallo de Pescado, which came with fish, fried yucca and salad. He rated it "average." The restaurant offers burritos, which we heard were excellent but didn't try on this visit.

Next on the list is **Cafeteria Sol y Luna**, located just adjacent to the Seguro Social, on the road to Guisaro. Opened recently, this restaurant is clean and new, if a little sparsely decorated. There are no menus, and we were offered a choice to two casados: one with pork, one with chicken. The chicken came in a sauce with vegetables and was very good. The pork chop tasted more like ham according to our volunteer who ordered it, but she said it was tasty. The accompaniments were the usual side dishes: rice, beans and a small salad. All in all, we thought the food and service were good. If you're spending the day waiting at SS, this would be a good bet for lunch. *Side note*: the owner of the restaurant is also the co-owner of Jalapenos.

You'd have to be looking for **Soda Picarita** in order to find it. It's hidden away up some steps from the other sodas at the central market. What attracted us to it were the cute white lace tablecloths that covered each table. What wasn't so cute was the view of the bus parking lot, although it would be the perfect vantage point to keep an eye on your bus if you wanted to make sure it didn't leave without you. On the wall of the soda many dishes were listed: ravioli, steak, empanadas, ceviche and so on, but we were only offered two choices: tripe soup and casado. The soup didn't appeal, so we all had a casado with "carne mexicana." It was the typical casado except for the fact that it came with spaghetti as one of the side dishes. The carne was shredded beef with a mild tomato sauce. The reasonable price of c1200 included a drink. When we asked our server if and when those other entrees listed on the wall were available, she replied that sometimes they had all of them. I guess we hit an off-day.

Well-known by many locals is the **Restaurante San Martin**, adjacent to the park. This place changed hands a little while back and seems to be better because of that change. The buffet is still there with multiple entrees, vegetables and salads costing c1400 including a drink. (If you're in a hurry, this is the way to go. You could be in and out of there in 15 minutes depending on how fast you eat and how high you mound the plate). Our dining companions who tested the buffet reported the food as "typical" and "average." Those of us who ordered from the menu (hamburger, shrimp salad, fajita, and arroz con camerones) agreed with our friends' assessments. What we all really liked was the open, comfortable seating with a view of the park and the fact that 3 or 4 "servers" in clean white shirts hovered around the tables readily bringing drinks, condiments, or whatever else we needed. Here's the surprise: the restaurant is open until 10PM at night and does serve wine, but not beer.

Buen Provecho!