

Now Open: A New Chef and a New Name for El Jardín Cantina in Liberty Station

The cheerful Mexican restaurant in Liberty Station has been reborn with a new name, a new chef, and a new attitude

BY [ERIN JACKSON](#) | OCTOBER 28, 2019

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Images courtesy of El Jardín Cantina

From the moment it opened last summer, there was a buzz about El Jardín. Under the leadership of Claudette Zepeda-Wilkins, the “grandma chic” Mexican restaurant gained critical acclaim from local and national food critics and was one of a handful of San Diego restaurants to earn a place in the inaugural Michelin Guide California.

Many were shocked when the restaurant shuttered for a concept refresh in July, which included a new name, El Jardín Cantina, and a new chef at the helm.



Sous Chef Jocelyn Cano, who most recently worked as the Executive Chef at [Morning Glory](#), describes the new culinary direction as “classic, fun, delicious, and approachable Mexican cuisine, with our own flare.”

“The majority of what people said what they wanted from a Mexican food option in Liberty Station was something more approachable, less expensive, and somewhere they could take kids, as well,” said Owner Johan Engman.

And it is a fun menu, starting with the guacamole flight that stars three different varieties. Con Rajas is a savory spin made with grilled poblano, corn, caramelized onion, and cotija cheese; Con Granda is made with sweet and juicy orange segments, pomegranate, and grasshopper salt; and the third in the lineup is a traditional guac.





There's also a salsa flight, including house-made cruda, molcajete, and macha that all provide a unique balance of heat and acidity that can be used to turn up the volume on other dishes.

The vegan huitlacoche tamale is a stand-out, with an umami-rich mushroom and huitlacoche (corn smut) filling sitting atop a dollop of cashew crema that contrasts nicely with a bright nopal salsa.

“The inspiration behind our vegan tamal was actually Maryella’s—one of the three Rise & Shine corporate chefs who developed the new El Jardin Cantina menu,” said Chef Cano. “That girl can cook!”

More vegan options are on the way as the culinary team continues to refine the menu.



Seven different tacos—including carnitas with pickled vegetables and chicharron, skirt steak carne asada, and portabello mushroom—are available a la carte.

Premium proteins, thoughtful salsa pairings, and sophisticated plating elevate the street food staple to something that resembles a modern small plate served on a fresh-made corn tortilla.

Full-size entrees include favorites like lamb barbacoa, grilled whole sea bass with roasted vegetables for two, and birria de res—a belly-warming bowl of fork-tender short rib and creamy olla beans floating in hearty broth.



Between the tortillas, chips, and possibly a tamale, you'll probably have your fill of corn before dessert, but the elote dulce is worth the splurge.

The elegant plated dessert celebrates the foundational ingredient of Mexican cuisine from husk to cob. Cano prepares the sweet pan de elote with the kernels, the meringue with the husk, and the sweet and smoky ice cream using the cob.

“We try as much as possible for zero waste here at El Jardín Cantina and I wanted to make sure to incorporate that facet into the dessert menu as well.”

Visit [El Jardín Cantina](https://eljardincantina.com)

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eljardincantina.com