

# Tamales serves Mexican food with a Highland Park spin

NICKI KOETTING, Editor

Highland Park's Tamales ... A Mexican Joint was always there for Jeff Gorbena when he really needed it.

Gorbena, who grew up in Highland Park and attended Red Oak Elementary School, Edgewood Middle School and Highland Park High School, needed a job when he graduated from college.

"I called an old friend when I first needed a job out of college," Gorbena said. "I called her up and said, 'Hey Jill, I need a job.' And she said, 'I think my boss is hiring.' So I came in here [to Tamales] and worked here from 1995-1998."

After those three years, Gorbena left Tamales to work in the city, but in 2002, after the tech bubble crash, he found himself in another bind.

"I called up my old boss, and I said, 'James, I need a job,' and he said, 'OK, I'll call you back in a couple of minutes,'" Gorbena said. "And he called me back and said, 'You can work tonight, tomorrow, Friday and Sunday, and we'll talk about next week, next week.'"

Gorbena worked at Tamales for another three years, until the restaurant's owner had some financial troubles and had to close the restaurant.

It was then that Tamales, which had existed at 493 Central Ave. since 1989, needed Gorbena.

Gorbena didn't hesitate.

"I was the first call in to the landlord," he said.

After only three months, Tamales re-opened under Gorbena's ownership, and it's been smooth sailing ever since.

The now-Northbrook resident didn't change much about Tamales after he took over. The restaurant has had the same chef and sous chef since Gorbena re-opened it



The chicken enchiladas (\$16.95) can be served with either tomatillo, mole, guajillo or ancho barbecue sauce at Tamales ... A Mexican Joint, 493 Central Ave., Highland Park.

PHOTOS BY CHRISTA ROOKS/22ND CENTURY MEDIA

nine years ago, and the same menu that offers a diverse mix of traditional Mexican food with a unique spin.

"I typically describe [the menu] as authentic ingredients presented in unique ways, or unique ingredients presented in typical ways," Gorbena said.

For example, Tamales serves its namesake — hot, fresh tamales — which you can order filled with shrimp, chicken, mushrooms and even pumpkin. Yes, pumpkin. No, it's not just another seasonal item that has jumped on the pumpkin spice bandwagon. These tamales are served year-round.

"I know very typically that squash and pumpkin flour is a typical ingredient in certain regions of Mexico, but since it's a little more difficult to get up here, we [give the tamale] a pumpkin puree twist," Gorbena said.

"It's similar, but different. It's one of my most popular tamales."

So on a cold, windy fall day — a perfect day to try warm, filling Mexican food — *The Highland Park Landmark* Editor Christa Rooks and I visited Tamales to taste

the unique pumpkin tamale for ourselves.

The pumpkin tamale was served with roasted tomatillo and guajillo chile sauces, and the sweetness of the pumpkin puree mixed well with the spicy sauces. Rooks had never tried tamales before, and said this one was a unique and pleasing first experience with the traditional dish.

Tamales at the restaurant are \$5.95 each, and you can order two served with rice and beans for \$13.50.

We also tried the fish ceviche small plate (\$8.95), which is white fish chopped up and mixed with pico de gallo and avocado. The ceviche was incredibly fresh and saturated with lime and spices. Rooks and I cleaned the plate in minutes.

The enchiladas (\$16.95) can be filled with chicken, ground beef, shrimp or vegetables and your choice of either tomatillo, mole, guajillo or ancho barbecue sauce. We tried the chicken enchiladas, with mole and tomatillo sauces, and eating the cheesy, spicy warm dish was a perfect way to brighten the chilly, drab day.

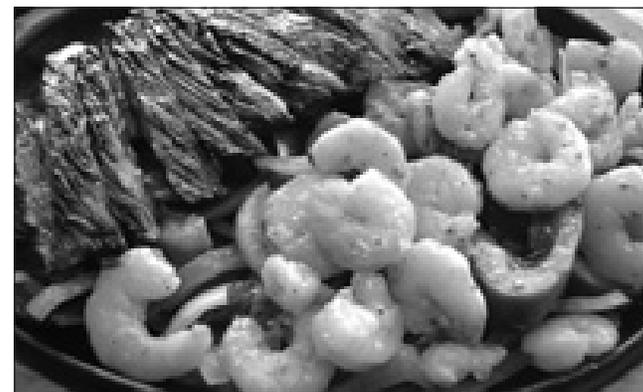
## TAMALES ... A MEXICAN JOINT

493 Central Ave.,  
Highland Park  
(847) 433-4070  
www.tamalesmexican  
restaurant.com  
11:30 a.m.-9 p.m.,  
Monday-Thursday  
11:30 a.m.-10 p.m.,  
Friday-Saturday  
4-9 p.m., Sunday

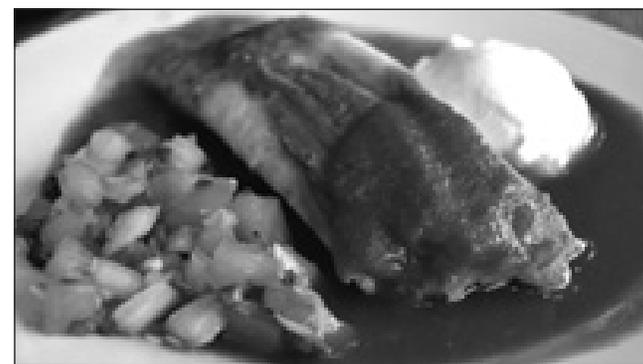
We also had the steak and shrimp fajita combination (\$21.95). Both the steak and shrimp were marinated excellently, and the juiciness of the steak contrasted nicely with the crispiness of the shrimp.

All fajitas at Tamales are served with corn, flour or wheat tortillas. You can substitute the tortillas for lettuce wraps if you prefer a healthier option. You can also order the fajitas to be served with a side of lettuce, sour cream, tomatoes, cheese and guacamole for \$3.95.

Gorbena said while he gets deliveries from his food purveyors two to three times a week, he also often drives down to the South Water



The steak and shrimp fajita combination (\$21.95) is a customer favorite at Tamales.



The pumpkin tamale (\$5.95) at Tamales is one of the Highland Park restaurant's most popular dishes.



The fish ceviche (\$8.95) is white fish chopped up and mixed with pico de gallo and avocado.

Market in Chicago to pick out fresh fruit and vegetables himself.

With natural ingredients, it can be "tough to calibrate" the spiciness of the food — but Gorbena said he wouldn't serve his customers anything else.

"They're all fresh ingredients, so you're not getting a lot of processed garbage," he said. "It doesn't get more

natural than this. We don't use a lot of cans. I have purveyors try to sell me pre-prepared stuff all the time. I just can't do that."

Tamales is open for lunch and dinner Monday-Saturday, and is open for dinner on Sunday. The restaurant serves wine and a large selection of tequilas, and also caters.