

dining HOPE S. PHILBRICK

Don't kiss this toad

Leap away from Blue Frog Cantina, an East Atlanta disappointment

BLUE FROG CANTINA HAS SOME favorable qualities: a decent East Atlanta location (the former space of Heaping Bowl & Brew), a compelling name, adorable menu graphics, and a cute statue of a sombrero-wearing frog to greet those who enter.

And it's evident that some thought went into details. There's a bowl of water outside for canine guests, and the restrooms are adequately stocked with the necessary paper products.

Unfortunately, it's mediocre at best from there.

Only open four months, Blue Frog

Cantina already has a grimy worn-down look and feel. The front patio provides a better atmosphere than the dingy dining room. Seating is very limited — not a problem, since the majority of tables are vacant. The bar is more popular than the dining room; it dominates the indoor space and half its stools are filled.

The menu boasts creative drink options alongside standard Latin American fare.

CHIPS AND SALSA ARRIVE PROMPTLY. Though greasy, the chips are crisp. The runny, mild salsa features chunks of onion and cilantro.

The Blue Frog version of empanadas (\$2.95) is a savory-sweet knife-and-fork food. The filling is tasty, but the dense crust has a distinct lard bite that is unpleasant.

What differentiates the Steak Chimichanga (\$6.95) from the Steak Burrito (\$6.95) is that the former is deep-fried. Both are served with a scoop of Mexican rice and a salad of shredded iceberg lettuce and a tomato sliver.

Onions dominate the steak filling. The



gummy tortilla shells are coated by pale melted cheese. The overall result is bland and goopy.

Water glasses stand empty for several minutes before they are filled. Staff members occupy the table nearest the kitchen, ignoring guests in favor of gossiping and laughing together in clear view.

After one rather dismal dining experience, I return to give the place a second try. Maybe it was a bad night. Maybe I just didn't "get it." But all that is accomplished this time is a slight improvement by comparison.

Tuesday specials (which were the same on Sunday) are Tilapia Diablo (\$10.99) and Shrimp Scampi (\$10.50). Both feature a red sauce that tastes more like onions than hot peppers. The tilapia has a strange orange-hued crust floating on it — cornmeal? — and the shrimp is not deveined.

The shrimp tostada (\$4.95) appetizer, delivered after the entrées, suffers from an identity crisis: is it or is it not ceviche? The flavor of vinegar dominates the

shrimp, onion, avocado and tomato mixture atop the fried tortilla.

Perhaps what's missing from my table is a margarita. After all, the bar seems popular, the menu features an array of them, and to be honest, the food seems designed to best suit intoxicated palates.

What arrives is not the "regular" (\$4) I ordered: It's golden-hued and doused with premium tequila. It's whisked away in a huff and, in the process, spills on the table and my leg. The replacement is delivered and similarly splashed. Napkins are offered, but no top-off. The drink is gold, which the server insists is normal, and tastes like spoiled apricots.

At an adjacent table, a diner attempts to order two veggie enchiladas (\$6.95). The server explains this is impossible because the dish has four enchiladas.

After debate, the manager arrives. He raises his voice and insists the dish cannot be made with two enchiladas because he wouldn't know what to charge. (Uh, how about half?) The plate arrives with four enchiladas.

OUR SERVER CLEARS OUR PLATES AND disappears. I wave her down for the bill. My dining companion whispers, "It's as if she has never been to a restaurant before."

That might be said of the whole crew behind Blue Frog Cantina, who seems not to have benchmarked any other Hispanic restaurants in the Atlanta area.

With no shortage of options offering superior food and service, Blue Frog Cantina is easy to skip.

i FOOD FILE

Blue Frog Cantina
469 Flat Shoals Ave. SE
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Food: ★★★★★

Service: ★★★★★

Comfort & Aesthetics: ★★★★★

Value: ★★★★★

Scene: ★★★★★