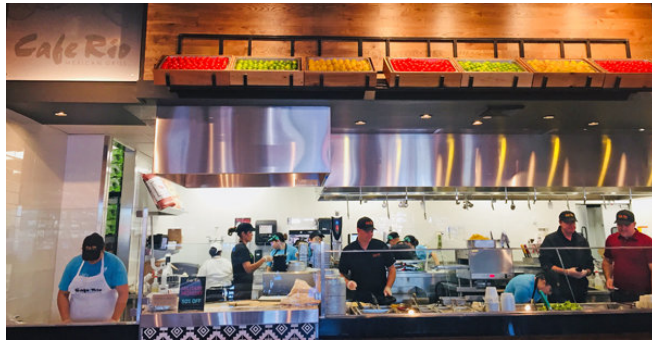


Café Rio opens first Mexican grill in Point Loma

by VICTORIA DAVIS

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While the chain, founded in 1997, has 114 locations in 12 states across the country, this is the first to be built in San Diego. / Photo by Victoria Davis

More than a hundred San Diegans were standing eagerly in line with friends and family outside Point Loma's new Café Rio to get a Mexican grill lunch on Jan. 17. Parents with babies strapped to their chest, teens in their slippers, and kids with scooters slung over their shoulders had all woken up early to be the first of 300 guests to get a free meal at the restaurant's grand opening.

"We're so lucky because we have such loyal and dedicated customers, and the support of the community means a lot to us," said Jennifer Burns, spokesperson for Café Rio. "My favorite part is seeing the crowd and their smiling faces when we cut the red ribbon and they know our doors are open."

The festivities on Jan. 17 began with Burns presenting a \$2,500 check, on behalf of the café, to the San Diego Unified School District. The Chamber of Commerce's Lexi Farrington cut the red ribbon and Miss California Princess put the traditional first slice into a two-foot-long burrito, following her enthusiastic cry, "I love Café Rio!"

The fervor didn't stop at the doors. Following the crimson carpet into the café, guests were greeted with employees' charismatic cheers for anyone who ordered a chicken quesadilla.

"I think I'm going to order that [quesadilla], just so I can get the chant too," said Farrington with a giggle. "We like to have great employees that serve the food with energy," added Steve Vaughn, president of Café Rio.

While the chain, founded in 1997, has 114 locations in 12 states across the country, this is the first to be built in San Diego. The design is more modern, but the ethnic personality still shines with colorful drink bars and traditional patterns in black and white that trim the walls. Vaughn has high hopes for this particular location.

"We really think it's going to be a great market where people appreciate the food," said Vaughn. "The founding chef took the flavors from his home in Texas' Rio Grande Valley and put it into his food. It's pretty unique."

Everything in the restaurant is made from scratch and served fresh. Even the vegetables and fruit hanging on display high above the serving line is real and ripening. The produce is changed out daily so nothing goes bad. There are no freezers or microwaves.

The employees make the tortillas right in front of customers, starting with flour and water, then hand-rolling the dough to bake on the Comal.

The lime pie, sweet pork barbacoa enchilada and cilantro lime rice are just some of the popular menu items.

"The food and the employees are the most important pieces that make Café Rio stand out," said Vaughn. "We like to think of ourselves as a five-star kitchen in a fast and casual format."

Café Rio

Where: 3309 Rosecrans St.

Hours: 10:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. Mondays through Saturdays, 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Sundays.

Info: 619-488-6849.

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