

Restaurant Review: Hola Arepa

BY DYLAN HOLTMEIER

I'D HAD MY EYE on Hola Arepa for a while and finally got around to driving outside of my normal St. Paul range. This Minneapolis restaurant is pretty well known and hard to get into, but for good reason. They were rated as one of the top 50 restaurants in all of the US a few years back, featuring Venezuelan arepas and other Latin American street food staples. They are almost constantly busy which always signals for a good meal ahead. It's a real gamble walking into a restaurant at peak feed time and there's no one there, but that was not a problem here.

They've really got their aesthetic down to a tee and they know it. All the decor is impeccably selected and extremely cohesive. Nothing seems out of place or disproportionate. Even the covered outdoor patio seating which is just a glorified plastic tent with heat lamps is comfortable and aesthetically pleasing. They've got cool tropical plants overflowing from their pots and covering the walls and windows, which adds to a homey, familiar feeling of the space. It definitely appeals to a certain demographic though. It's obvious this is a millennial restaurant and it feels like it hardcore, which is not necessarily a bad thing. Honestly it's a great spot for people watching and just observing your surroundings.

So I've introduced the restaurant as a critically acclaimed, fun restaurant, but that's no good if the food is terrible. Thankfully, it's pretty darn good. My friends and I started by ordering the Cornmeal Empanadas which, even with the initially disappointing lack of pork or beef, was pretty fire. Who knew mashed black beans and swiss cheese in a corn wrapping could be so good? They served it with pickled cabbage which was better than it should have been and something they call chipotle aioli, which is literally just Barb's chipotle mayo. I swear they have the same supplier, it's so similar. For my entree, I ordered the chorizo arepa which was absolutely fantastic. The thinly sliced chorizo was accompanied with black beans and more of that good pickled cabbage, all stuffed between an arepa bun, which is a cornmeal cake cut in half. The two sauces it came with were absolutely the best tasting thing there, just perfectly balanced in flavor. One was a green aioli with a nice tang and the other was based on cotija, which is a cheese similar to wet feta. I know that sounds gross, but it was honestly so good. The arepa also came with yucca fries, which were just as good or better than potato fries but without the grease guilt that comes with them. They seemed like a root vegetable that was boiled and fried ever so slightly, so the inside was soft and the outside was just barely crisp. The worst part about them was there were only 5 that came with the meal. For me, this restaurant loses out on a perfect score due to the price. The arepa was \$14, which isn't bad, but I'm used to big American portions and wanted some to take home. Even the Cornmeal Empanada was \$10 and there was only 3 of them. I think it's an excellent restaurant with some of the best tasting food I've ever had, but don't expect to get overly generous portions for the price.



Photo Credit: Dylan Holtmeier



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