

A casino known for its 24-hour Texas Hold 'Em games and weekly blackjack tournaments isn't an obvious choice for good eats, but sometimes you have to take a gamble.

Outside of Bankers Casino, customers are greeted by an arrangement of tall and crooked cactus plants and one or two security cards asking for I.D.

Once entering, one may be surprised at the elegance of this establishment, which sits adjacent to the Oldtown Salinas parking garage. Spotless marble floors and a golden Buddha statue lead to the game floor, where all seven tables are occupied on this early Friday night.

The dining area nestled to the right has several customers sitting at the long marble bar that matches the floor and a family with a small child sitting in a leather booth.

I take the sight of the family as a sign that there's more to this place than poker.

Though the games go on all day long, food is served from 10am to 1am. The menu offers foods ranging from breakfast items like chilaquiles (\$7.99), appetizers including asada fries (\$7.99) and mostly Mexican entrees with "Asian" and burgers thrown in for good measure.

The menu is more images than words. Which could be helpful considering how dazed late-night diners on a Baccarat losing streak might be. Descriptions are *minima*, so you're left to decide based on the title, menu image or a server's recommendation. This could translate confusion for foods that are somewhat uncommon like the bacon-wrapped shrimp called *camarones momia* (\$16.95) or the *aguachile* (\$14.99).

The *mariscos* (seafood) page of the menu sparks my interest on my initial visit. While ordering the *camarones a la diablo* (\$14.99) – a dish famous for its heat – my dining

partner makes a mistake that will determine the dining experience, asking the waiter if it's really *that*

spicy. The server assures us the dish wouldn't be that spicy at all. Sure enough, when the generous portion of sauteed shrimp arrives, despite a vibrant red salsa consisting mainly of chipotle peppers and tomato puree, the heat is present but very mild. Later, when the receipt came with “

no tan enchilosos

” (not too spicy) next to the

camarones

order, I realize it's been modified. Still, the sizable plate paired with a side of refried beans, rice, a forgettable salad of onions and lettuce, plus four tortillas is satisfying.

If the *camarones a la diablo* were as spicy as they're supposed to be, the pint-sized strawberry milkshake (\$5.00) would have been a cool and creamy way of combating that heat. The fish taco *dorado* (\$4.25), one of Banker's most popular items, brings contrasting textures and flavors in a fried tortilla that's crispy, but not so crispy to the point where it breaks under the weight of a bite. The tender filet of tilapia, crunchy red onions, cilantro and avocado inside is elevated further with a drizzle of smoky chipotle salsa with an unexpected but welcome tanginess to it.

My second visit on a Thursday evening sees the casino slightly less busy, but the clatter of poker chips moving around is as present as ever. A sign in the back of the game room reads, “English Only When Hands are in Play,” but excited conversations in Spanish between players continues anyway.

The dining area is empty aside from two people at the bar who ask to change the Mexican *futbo* / championship on the screen to the New Orleans Saints-Atlanta Falcons game. Bankers is in the holiday spirit with cocktails like the peppermint twist (\$7) that combines peppermint schnapps with Kahlua and a Christmas tree blocking the specials board in a corner of the room.

Feeling adventurous and slightly cheated out of spiciness from my previous visit, I order the *agu achile*

. Similar to ceviche, aguachile features raw shrimp “cooked” via marinating in a blended mixture of lime juice and serrano peppers.

Written by Administrator

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It took 30 minutes for the aguachile to arrive, and a *pollo tostada* (\$3.95) was completely forgotten, but at least the presentation was pretty. The plate of aguachile comes bright green with lime-serrano salsa, slices of cucumber and avocado.

The server compared the aguachile to the spiciest wings at Buffalo Wild Wings, and though I've never been there, I was eager for the challenging eat.

One bite of the chewy shrimp, split butterfly style to soak up as much as it can, and I instinctively reach for my glass of ice water. The salsa is supremely spicy and intensifies with consecutive bites, yet feels refreshing due to the dish's cold temperature and merciful hints of citrus. My only complaint was the size and shape: the butterflied shrimp are a bit too big to be enjoyed in one bite, and due to their firm sushi-like texture, difficult to cut with a fork or tortilla chip.

Using the avocado or cucumber to cool down is futile, as those refreshing vegetables are also soaked in the green liquid. My nose runs and I even shed a tear, but the duality of a dish served cold that's hot as hell feels like a guilty pleasure.

Since it's happy hour from 3-7pm, I order a savory *al pastor* taco for just \$1 before I finish. It was like a celebratory cigar after the aguachile.

Bankers Casino 111 Monterey St., Salinas. Food served 10am-1am. 422-6666, bankerscasino.net

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