

Little Rey: Raleigh Iron Works

Atmosphere: 3/5

Service: 3/5

Presentation: 2/5

Taste: 2/5

Price: 2/5

With its quintessential location on the corner, Little Rey, located in the up and coming Raleigh Iron Works district, definitely has genuine curb appeal. The colloquial Spanish terms of “entrada” near the door and “para llevar” over the takeout window, gives one the hope of experiencing some authentic Mexican cuisine in an obvious culture clash with the restaurant's surroundings. The facade checks off all the boxes of any new restaurant venture since 2020 with its expansive glass windows for optimal natural light and rustic light fixtures that any hipster would admire with a smirk. Upon entering, you are immediately greeted by another recent trend in America's dining landscape, the fast casual experience. This realization quickly starts to throw your hopes into doubt...surely this is not what you were promised at first glance? Americanized Mexican? This seems to put into perspective why Little Rey's is located in this trendy upstart neighborhood.

After selecting a menu from the tin on the counter, your worries start to dissipate as you recognize menu items such as Guacamole and Chips, Breakfast Tacos, Huevos Rancheros, and Breakfast Chalupa. These traditional Mexican staples (maybe not “breakfast” tacos but tacos all the same) are going to save your brunch outing, plus who can't go wrong with the assortment of beer and margaritas on the front page that any Mexican joint worth their salt should offer. We opted to have the Guacamole and Chips, Huevos Rancheros, and Breakfast Chalupa with one “Bebida Del Dia” (“drink of the day” for the Spanishly challenged) and continued on with the typical fast casual dance by waiting for our drinks and locating a table. After securing our table and placing our “Wu-Tang Clan 1997” (Hank Williams was on the table next to us) table card in its metal scabbard for the waitstaff, we sampled the guacamole; fresh and flavorful are the words that jumped to the forefront of our minds as we scooped up bite after bite with our light yet crunchy chips.

Despite this opening barrage of flavor, fresh and flavorful were quickly replaced with dismay and disappointment. The watery beans of our Huevos Rancheros and Breakfast Chalupa certainly left much to be desired, along with the lack of crunch on my tostada that was anticipated after the opening avocado and tortilla act just a few minutes prior. To try and save the meal, we opted for the “Little Superica Hot Cakes” which ended up being anything but “yummy”; the powdered sugar often found on beignets and oily syrup did not offer a desirable flavor pallet. All

of these dishes were served on little paper food trays (picture nachos at the snack bar of a 1990s skating rink with that dispenser of nacho cheese being squirted on top, drowning your chips into one huge mush) which didn't seem either practical or pleasing on the eye. To say that the main event to this dining foray was a let down is putting it lightly, and with a price tag of \$40, you may be better off at a more proven fast casual counterpart: Chipotle.

The cherry on top of our experience was the lack of access to data on our phones while we searched for other dining options nearby, which had Little Rey offered a full service experience, would have been a welcome escape from the outside world. Luckily we did not have to linger very long due to the pace of proceedings, and made a quick getaway into the bustling sidewalk of the RIW. If you are looking for an Instagram worthy stop in this part of town, Little Rey may be a good option; the atmosphere and design choice seems very conscious of how social-media-forward we all are in 2025. Unfortunately, Chef Ford Fry's Little Rey, like so many others entering the foodie battlefield, has made the phrase "Style over Substance" ring true and this writer will be unlikely to "regresar otra vez".