

FEELING HOT

Chef Chris Wilber celebrates 12 years of Southwestern excellence at Canyon in Fort Lauderdale

It's a tad ironic that it took a Canadian chef to introduce Floridians to gourmet Southwestern cuisine. But Chris Wilber doesn't follow traditional rules. If he did, he wouldn't have opened Canyon in Fort Lauderdale 12 years ago when that city's dining scene was not exactly embracing new culinary concepts. But Wilber persevered and introduced South Floridians to his style of Southwestern cuisine, one that relies on Asian, South and Central American influences for a completely original spin. These days Wilber's Canyon is what all restaurants aspire to be: a neighborhood staple favored by locals, critics and newcomers alike. What's his secret? If only he'd tell.

FIM: Restaurants in South Florida come and go quickly, but Canyon has been around for 12 years. How do you do it?

CW: My philosophy is that a successful restaurant requires quality and consistency in both cuisine and service. I am in the kitchen virtually every night and some of my staff has been with me for 10 or more years. That's what makes us special.

FIM: Describe the cuisine at Canyon.

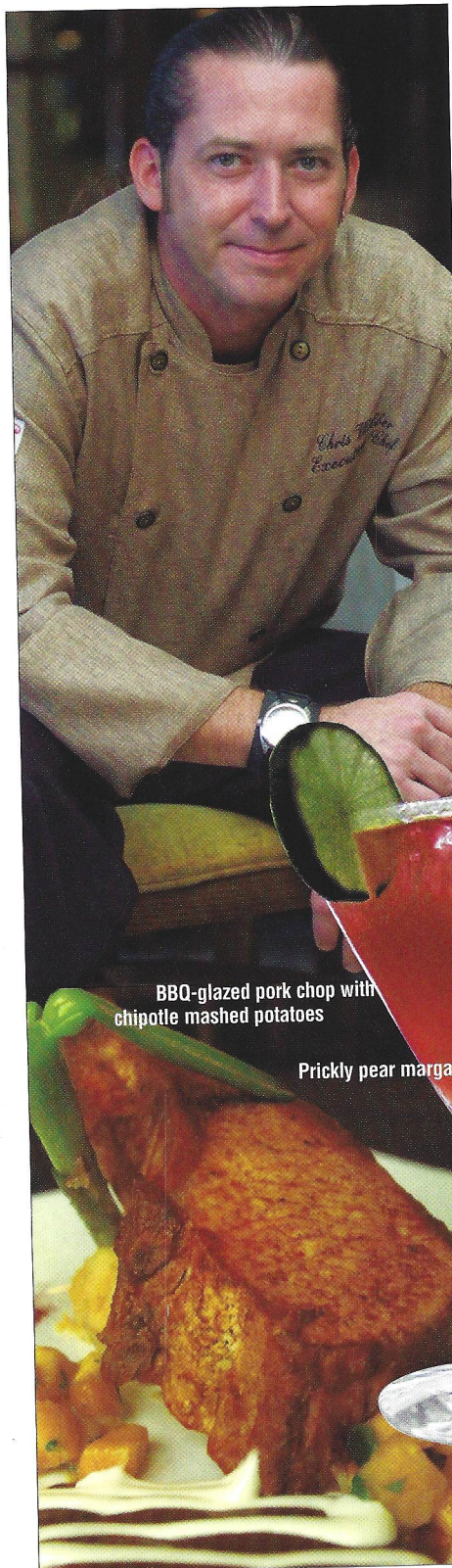
CW: Canyon's cuisine is upscale Southwestern with Asian, South and Central American influences.

FIM: What are the biggest misconceptions about Southwestern cuisine?

CW: Sometimes people confuse Southwestern cuisine with Tex-Mex, but Southwestern is a more sophisticated style of cooking. Tacos and chimichangas are not on my menu.

FIM: So what is on your menu? What are your more popular dishes?

CW: As far as appetizers go, the tuna tartar with crispy tortillas, wasabi cream and Thai chili, and the Marsala-dusted bison skewers with red chili cream are very popular.



BBQ-glazed pork chop with chipotle mashed potatoes

Prickly pear margarita

FIM: And for entrees?

CW: Filet mignon with poblano pesto goat cheese, zinfandel natural sauce and grilled vegetables, and the comal-grilled red snapper fillet with chipotle chili tomato coulis, twice cooked beans, guacamole and crispy blue corn are the top sellers.

FIM: You use many varieties of chilies in your cooking. What are your favorites?

CW: One of my favorites is the poblano chili, which I stuff with herbs and goat cheese and encrust in cornmeal. It's mild and can be enhanced in so many ways. I also like the flavor of the chipotle, which I use for sauces and salsas. It mixes well with grains and adds flavor and depth.

FIM: What makes your prickly pear margaritas so popular?

CW: There is definitely some mystique to them because the recipe is kept under lock and key. Beyond that, the prickly pear cactus fruit is delicious and we marinate it in exceptional 100 percent agave tequila. It is tangy and sweet and a sexy color. We sold 55,000 last year and are on our way to beat that number this year.

FIM: What's happening at the restaurant in October?

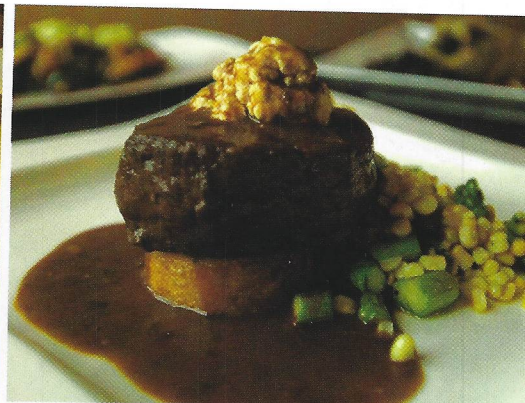
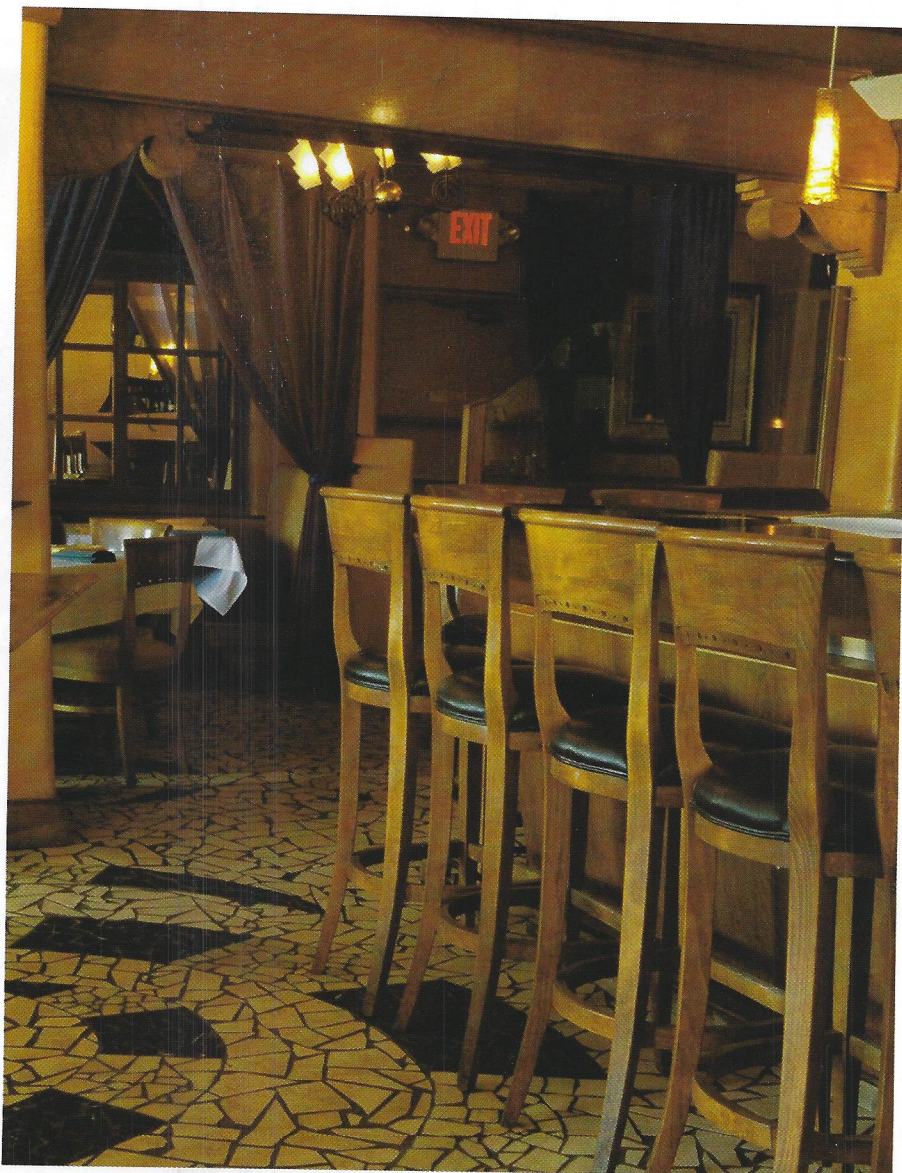
CW: I adjust my menu two to three times a year, as the seasons change. It all depends on what's available in terms of exotic vegetables and fresh fish. As the weather cools, I may have a little more on my menu in terms of sauces and heavier meats, such as my barbecue glazed pork chop with chipotle mashed potatoes.

FIM: Many South Florida restaurants that were considered institutions have recently closed. Does this worry you?

CW: No, not at all. We may actually open another similar restaurant in the future. We had a fantastic summer this year. And frankly, there isn't really any restaurant with food like Canyon.

Canyon: 1818 East Sunrise Boulevard, Fort Lauderdale, 954/765-1950. www.canyonfl.com □

WINING & DINING



CANYON

Southwestern flavors play a role in South Florida

By Nila Do

ONCE, WHILE RESEARCHING an article, an executive chef told me that a memorable meal should follow the parts to a memorable Shakespearian play. He said a meal should always be broken up into several acts, beginning with an appetizer to warm the scene and ending with a dessert to clean the palate just before curtain falls. Second, the main character of a plate should always have a foil, or an element to

the dish that enhances the main ingredient and vaults it to unseen proportions.

I found myself an active participant of a fantastic Shakespearian meal at Canyon, a chic Southwestern-inspired restaurant in Fort Lauderdale. Located next to the Gateway Plaza on Sunrise Boulevard, Canyon is a hole-in-the-wall restaurant without the hole in the wall. Popular amongst an ever-growing circle of loyal restaurant goers, Canyon has

quickly earned a reputation around town as the hip alternative to restaurants on Las Olas Boulevard. The atmosphere that night – which is indicative of any night at Canyon – was lively and energetic, a perfect location for a small group outing or girls' night out.

With a faux-adobe façade, Canyon's exterior is a prelude to the Southwestern flavors that abound inside the restaurant. Made popular by Iron Chef Bobby Flay, the Southwestern style of cooking has caught flames around the nation. Canyon's executive chef, Chris Wilber, has created a menu that is as authentic to the Southwest as the cactus itself. Loaded with ingredients like bison, peppers and black beans, Canyon is a slight ode of the Southwest found here in Fort Lauderdale. Wilber's thoughtful and innovative menu is unlike any other found in South Florida. Meticulously perfected, Wilber follows a philosophy of always bringing the finest ingredients to the table.

"I believe in freshness," Chef Wilber says. "If I need a sauce, I do it right then. I don't use pre-made parts."

The menu at Canyon is loaded with dishes that include peppers as either the main ingredient or a complimentary companion to the meal. The first act of our dinner included a gigantic poblano pepper stuffed with beef tenderloin, manchego cheese and onions as an appetizer. Served in a barbeque sauce, the stuffed pepper was divine. Slightly spicy and oozing with flavor, I couldn't think of a better way to begin the dinner. As our server Jeff aptly described the dish, "it hurt so good."

Next was our main course. On order were two dishes that we had thought were common to the restaurant world – seared tuna and filet mignon. Once served, we could not have been more wrong. Though we've seen both protein dishes in a variety of restaurants, from the common chain eateries to the more up-scale restaurants,



(Left) Executive Chef Chris Wilber; (Below) Shrimp appetizer



Canyon's innovative spin and blend of unexpected ingredients made this a meal to remember.

Doused in a gorgeous green tomatillo sauce, the thick cut of seared, coriander crusted tuna was dressed perfectly with diced fresh tomatoes and poblano peppers. Atop a bed of rice, the tuna was seared to perfection with an unbelievable punch of power that hit all taste buds.

But without a doubt, the story's protagonist was the filet mignon. Before being served the filet, our server Jeff carefully placed a sharp steak knife at our table and coyly mentioned the knife presentation was more ceremonious than functional. "You can probably cut it with a butter knife," he said.

And right he was. Undeniably tender and moist, the filet was fantastically seasoned and unlike any filet mignon I have ever tasted, vaulting it pass even those at the big-name steakhouses around town. The filet was accented and enhanced with

a brown zinfandel sauce and a layer of goat cheese, again a testament to Chef Wilber's novel spin on combining ingredients and belief in providing the freshest parts to a meal. What made it so great was not just how it was cooked or seasoned, but the unique and daring risks Chef Wilber took to take a "normal" menu item, and make it extraordinary with his Southwestern touch.

The denouement to the meal was a chocolate bread pudding that's stir fried and combined with a chambord sauce. The bread pudding put a cap to the evening's meal, dissolving almost instantaneous in my mouth.

And it's difficult to conclude an article on Canyon without mentioning its famous prickly pear margarita. Marinated in tequila for at least 24 hours (though sometimes it extends for three full days), the margarita is mixed with triple sec liqueur and a freshly squeeze sour mix. Garnished with a lime, the beautiful fiery pink cocktail made famous in the Southwest has been the rage

at Canyon since its introduction. It's no surprise some restaurant patrons come for the drinks just as much as the food.

As the curtain closed on my meal at Canyon, I couldn't help but think of how I'll remember this meal for years to come. Rare is it that a menu is so memorable, so innovative as to stand out in a market that is so saturated with fine dining. From first act to last, Canyon's story line was a continuous trend of unforgettable flavors that some would say originated in the Southwest, but I personally feel originated from Chef Wilber. And if the meal was actually a Shakespearean play, I'd give it a standing ovation. ■

Canyon

1818 E. Sunrise Blvd.
Fort Lauderdale, FL
www.canyonfl.com
Ph: 954.765.1950

Dining hours:

Monday through Thursday: 5:30-10:30 p.m.

Friday and Saturday: 5:30-11 p.m.

Sunday: 5:30-10 p.m.

Reservations: Not accepted

Corkage fee: \$18

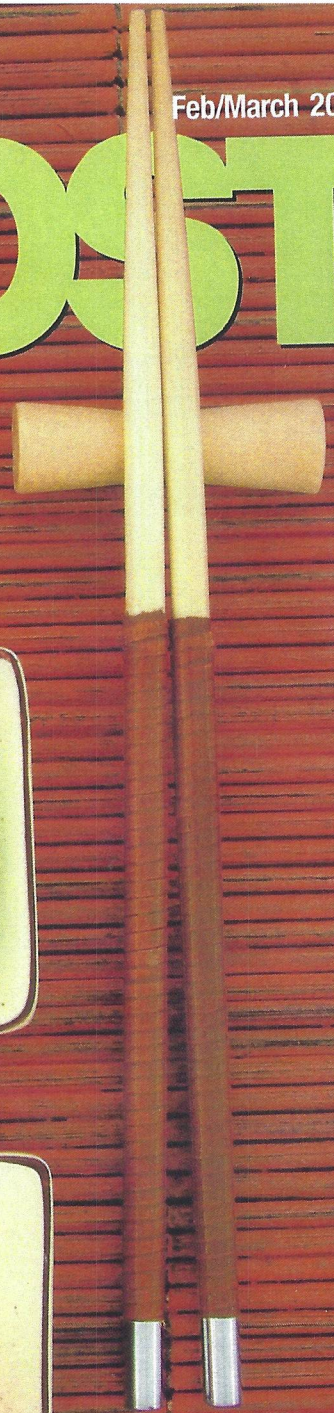
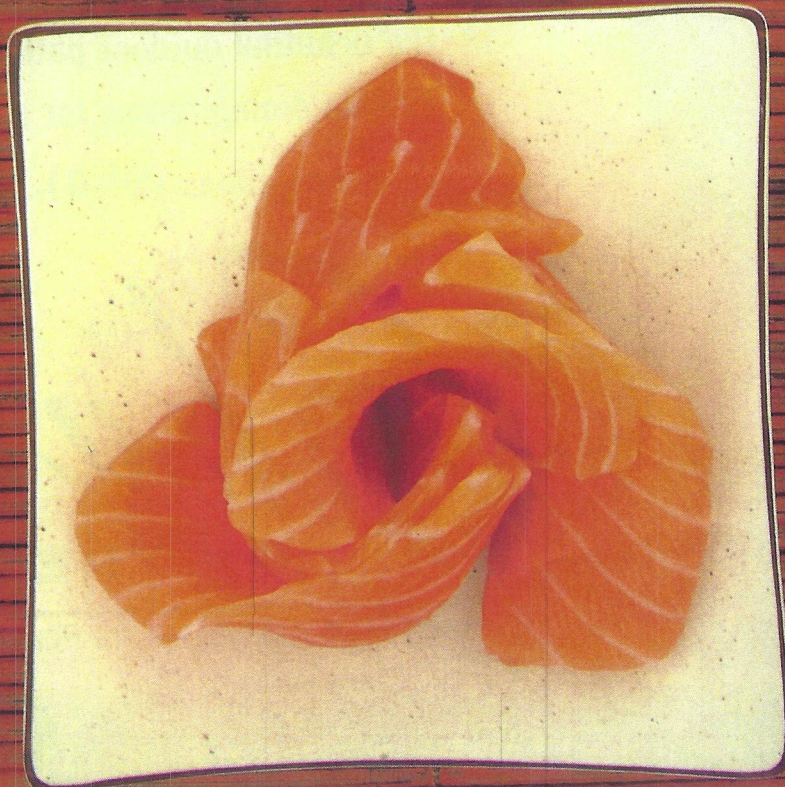
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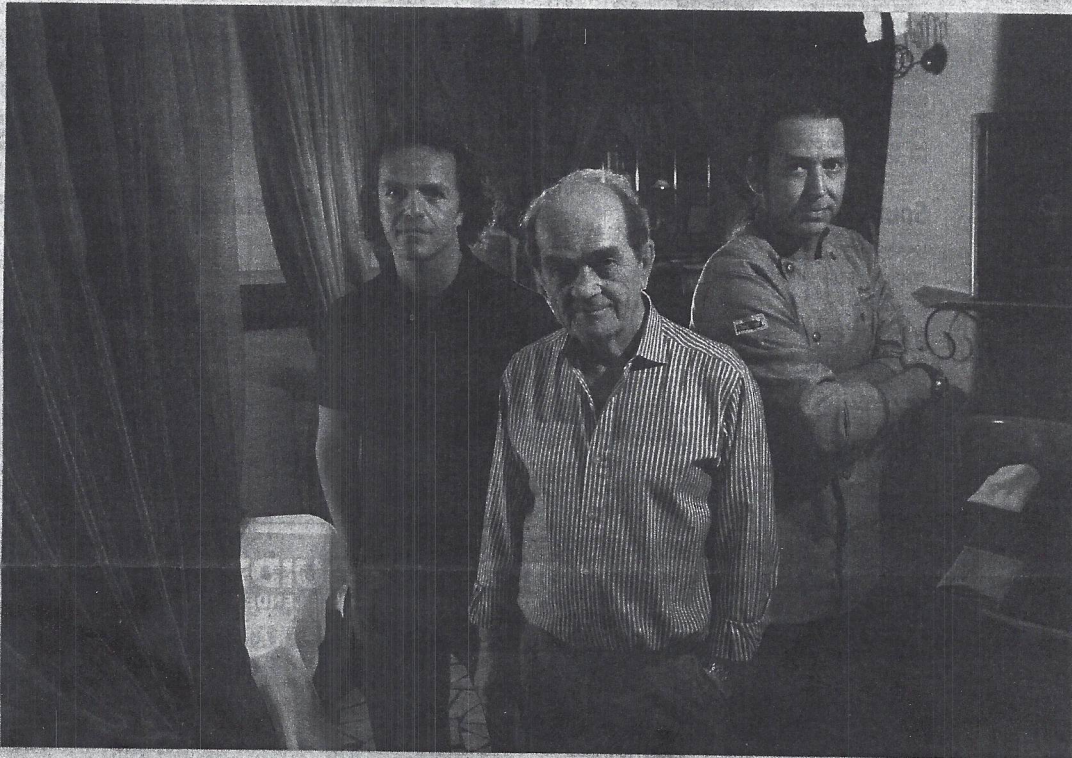


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THE ARTISTRY OF A RESTAURANT



CREATING DELICACIES: From left, Mario Di Leo, his father, Tony, and Chris Wilber run the Canyon restaurant in Fort Lauderdale. Wilber is the executive chef, while all three are co-owners. Canyon features upscale Tex/Mex cuisine. **Staff photo/Angel Valentin**

BY CINDY KENT
STAFF WRITER

How would you present a not-so-common meat dish like bison or an ocean delicacy such as oysters, bedded on exotic produce with purple potatoes, baby leeks or pattypan squash? Chances are, if you're Chris Wilber, executive chef and Canyon restaurant co-owner, you'd do something different every day.

Wilber sees the Fort Lauderdale southwestern-style eatery, which features upscale Tex/Mex cuisine, as the equivalent of an artist's canvas. And for co-owners Mario Di Leo and his father, Tony Di Leo, Canyon fits a template on how to run a business, formed by the family's history of working in and owning restaurants.

Canyon was founded 12 years ago on the same site of a previous Di Leo family restaurant, La Perla.

At that time, Tony Di Leo, and his brother, natives of Fallo, Italy, owned and operated La Perla as an Italian restaurant. Later Di Leo bought the shares owned by his brother, who moved back to Italy.

About the same time Di Leo and Wilber, who was La Perla's executive chef, began to see a local interest in a variety of cuisines, including southwestern-style foods. So they changed course, developing a new restaurant concept and menu. They redecorated and reopened the restaurant as Canyon.

Mario Di Leo, who had been planning to go to law school, decided to step into his father's footsteps, taking Canyon on as a full-time commitment. And Tony Di Leo ended up opening another Italian restaurant, Il Mulino, two doors down from Canyon. Mario Di Leo

SMALL BUSINESS PROFILE

CANYON

1818 Sunrise Blvd., Fort Lauderdale
954-765-1950
www.canyonfl.com

Upscale restaurant with Southwestern-themed cuisine has been open for 12 years.

Owners: Chris Wilber, Mario Di Leo, Tony Di Leo
Advice: Mario Di Leo: "You have to know what your costs are when considering how to price your products."

and Wilber don't have ownership in Il Mulino.

Wilber and the Di Leos ensure each restaurant's individual identity and reputation with separate menus, concepts and day-to-day operations.

"Keep the books separate. Keep the staffs separate," said Tony Di Leo.

Canyon, which employs about 23 people, hosts up to 900 customers weekly, yet does little or no advertising. Revenues will exceed \$2 million for 2007. Meals are prepared to order, and generally the typical stay is 45 minutes to two hours. The restaurant doesn't accept reservations. Obtaining unique ingredients for those one-of-a-kind dishes that customers have come to expect keeps Wilber vigilant. "Ingredients like citrus, flour and coffee are among our biggest expenses," he said.

Produce and herb supplier Dan Sessa, of Miami-based Fresh From The Farm, is constantly in search of finding that unusual hybrid squash, tempting fruits and palatable herbs for his client. Sessa be-

gan his company with La Perla as his first customer about 15 years ago. "Canyon is a small restaurant," Sessa said. "But their orders are as big as some of my biggest accounts."

Nestled between the Gateway movie theater and Il Mulino, Canyon is one of several eating places in the vicinity. The venues are unique enough that there isn't direct competition, said Di Leo. But he has seen several restaurants start up, only to close within a year.

"You have to have a good plan," said Mario Di Leo. "We never wavered from our concept, the food, our principles or quality." Di Leo emphasized that a caring professional workplace is a good way to retain employees and that a relaxed dining environment makes customers feel at home. "You can't be too dictatorial," he said. "Because customers will sense that."

Cindy Kent can be reached at ckent@sun-sentinel.com or 954-356-4662.



TROPICAL LIFE

FOOD & DINING

CLINK!

The prickly pear a smooth move

BY MADELEINE MARR

mmarr@MiamiHerald.com

I finally caved. After incessant prodding from colleagues and readers, I had to try Canyon's prickly pear margarita for myself. It was definitely worth the drive to Fort Lauderdale.

The bustling Southwestern restaurant an ice cube's throw from the Gateway movie theater claims it served more than 55,000 of these babies last year. Totally believable.

"It doesn't matter if you're a guy or a girl — people love these," says executive chef Chris Wilber. "My mom doesn't even drink and she'll have two."

This is not your average margie. She's as red as a cosmo, thanks to the primary ingredient, the fleshy fruit of the prickly pear cactus. Wilber peels a handful of green, spiny "pears" each day and macerates them in reposado tequila until the color bleeds.

The taste: Sublimely tart, sweet, potent — and addictive.



DIY

- **Mix** 1½ ounces silver tequila, 1 ounce triple sec, 1 ounce lime juice, ½ ounce prickly pear cactus syrup and ¼ ounce OJ. (Cheri's Prickly Pear Cactus Syrup is \$5.25 at cheridesertharvest.com; Bolthouse Farms prickly pear cactus lemonade, at supermarkets, could do in a pinch, Wilber says.)

- **Cover** and shake well.

- **Pour** into an ice-filled margarita glass or stemmed cocktail glass (rimmed with salt if you like). Garnish with a lime slice.

FYI

Usually \$9.50, the margaritas are \$8 during happy hour, 5:30-7 p.m. Sunday-Friday, at Canyon, 1818 E. Sunrise Blvd., Fort Lauderdale; 954-765-1950.