Qdoba Grill: Giving You Your Food Naked

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Qdoba Mexican Grill is probably the only place in Harrisonburg where you can order your food "naked." It shouldn’t come as a surprise, then, to learn that it’s a popular dining spot for college students.

Qdoba is a recent addition to Harrisonburg Crossing, the new $48 million "retail power center" anchored by Wal-Mart and adjacent to JMU. With a style best described as "yuppie-Mex," the fast-casual chain sports an upscale décor similar to a Starbucks or Krispy Kreme store, its walls littered with trendy graphics and snappy phrases dreamt up by the franchise’s marketing department.

"Though your burrito is naked, we strongly suggest that you are not," declares a sign on the table.

Burritos, Qdoba’s signature menu item, are available in traditional wrapped form or "naked" in a bowl if you find the tortilla gets in the way of the fresh, bold ingredients. Each one is made-to-order at a long, Subway-style counter with rows of ingredient options.

Freshness seems to be the mantra at Qdoba, one that I heard or read repeatedly in my two visits to the restaurant. The first time, I ordered the Grilled Vegetable Burrito, the vegetables of which (zucchini, scallions, eggplant, and red peppers) were scraped from the bottom of the pan and did not astound me with their freshness. They were not bad, but they would have been better fifteen minutes earlier.

That shouldn’t have happened, general manager Tammy Dunn assured me. Each item along the assembly line has a timer to ensure that the food does not stand too long after preparation. Since the store only opened three weeks ago, training is still ongoing and mistakes may be made, but they’re perfecting their art rapidly. "If your food’s not perfect, we want to know about it. We’ll do whatever it takes to make it right," Dunn said.

Indeed, my experience was much better on my second visit to the store. I didn’t have to repeat my order to each worker in the chain as I did the first time, and I was given more attention. Both times, the store was packed with patrons, so guests should be prepared to wait in line. It’s a good thing, too, because with all the options available, it takes that long to figure out exactly what you want. When your burrito is assembled, though, the options come at a dizzying rate. Black or pinto beans? Which of the five salsas? Cheese or sour cream? Will you have it naked?

The upscale, plenty-of-choices concept seems to have worked well for the franchise, which was recently purchased by Jack in the Box for $45 million. The first store opened in Denver in 1995 and was greeted with early success, bringing in over $1.5 million in the first year. Now, Denver has "[Qdobas] on every corner" according to Dunn, who trained there for four weeks before the opening of the Harrisonburg store. "It was great to see the concept in action," she said.

"Business is absolutely wonderful," Dunn said. "We’re in a great location and have a variety of clientele, from college kids to families with young children and even older people. Everyone loves fresh food." Qdoba now has over 100 locations in 22 states and plans to open 150 more in the near future.

The menu offers "signature" and regular burritos, quesadillas, taco salads, and three-cheese nachos for $4 to $6 per entrée. Tacos, tortilla soup, and chips with a variety of dips are well under $3 each. Hours are Monday through Saturday 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. and Sun. 12 a.m. to 9 p.m.