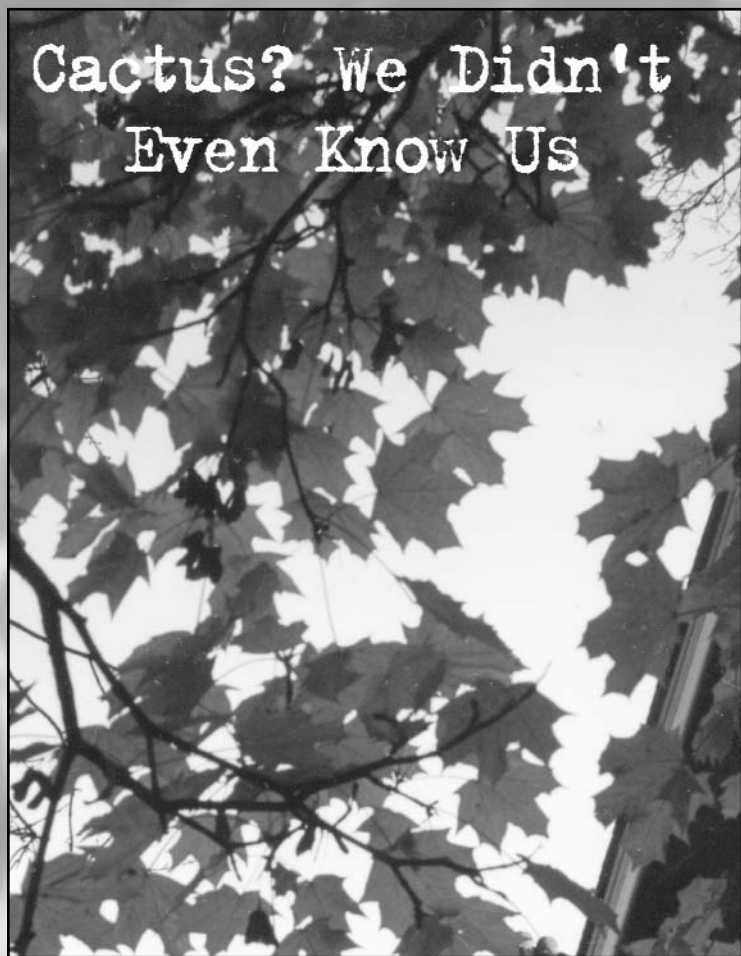



Cactus? We Didn't
Even Know Us



 remember that episode of Duck Tales where our feathered heroes find the city of Shangri-La, a hidden utopia that enchants them to stay until they find out its dark secret? Cactus, baby, Cactus.

First things first: I love Mexican food. I especially love Good Mexican food. And I can get snobbish about it, but I also love Lots of Mexican food, even if it's lots of Bad Mexican food.

Well, this wasn't it.

I had been looking forward to it all day, fasting so I could stuff myself with the worst quality authentic Mexican dishes. At the end of the work day we biked the long and arduous roads to Belsize Park. I wasn't exhausted but I was sweating without enough breath to yell obscenities involving big dick and my ass at the top of my lungs disturbing the UK's citizens. Silly English, repression is for Brits.

Needful to say, I felt like I earned that night's dinner, especially since Jesse was paying. The only identifying factor to the place was a sign outside a colourful door. We rang a doorbell and were buzzed in. We walked down a narrow stairway that opened up to a haven of South American cheeziness. Fun fiesta music blared out of the stereo as our eyes

registered arrays of bright colours everywhere, with a sign reading, "The More You Spend, The More We Like You," and another that said, "Complaints — Pick a Number" with the numbers attached to a grenade pin. We claimed a table, settled for a few seconds, then made our way to the boofay.



It ... was ... beau.

"Shangri-La," Jesse said. Agreed. It was a huge array of great looking food. Excellence *and* taste. I was astounded as mini-burritos, grilled corn, Spanish rice, and yes, the infamous British Authentic Mexican cauliflower and cheeze warmed my innocent eyes ... for just £4.89! I ... I love. As I was admiring on a purely visual level, without even enough time to breathe in the smells, our waiter interrupted. "What do you want to drink?"

"Water will be fine."

"You have to order something."

"Oh, okay, well we'll just go back and sit down and —"

"No."

"Uhhh, we might just need a minute to —"

"No."

"Could . . . we . . . see a drink menu?"

"On the board." He pointed, wanting us to order from a list I could barely read at that distance.

And so began the downfall of our night.

The food was plentiful and bountiful and goodful. The salsa was dead on. And though it was definitely Brit-Mex — tuna fish salad, beets, and such — it was still good. Every bean dish had a distinctive taste rather than "Oh ... Mexican." The grilled corn was seasoned in a way that made me want more (lightly salted, heavily peppered, with a hint of spiciness, each of which activated a different part of the tongue), even though the quality

holding on while trampling
styrofoam burger boxes
underfoot past blocks of
electronics and ever-
changing billboards.

of the corn itself was far from the best. But that was the only complaint as far as food quality. The meat was identifiable and tasted like the animal it came from. The vegetable dishes were oily but mixing them up with rice counteracted that. Yet as the night went on the place became less and less a place we enjoyed as we were rudely snubbed by the waiter, who took three requests for another glass of water before actually bringing it to us.

At the end of the night we paid our £4.85 plus £1.50 for soda plus £1.50 just because the waiter felt like it and the under-five-quid night ended up being £7.85 each; that's a whole £15.70 out of Jesse's pocket.

Upon exiting Jesse said, "Lets never go here again."

Agreed.

And with that we rode down the hill towards Camden.

Little attention is requested in a buffet; there is no middleman, it's You vs. Food. From time to time there will be interaction, but to have the experience ruined because of the service would entail a wait staff that breached the line between ignoring their customers and actively treating them badly. This waiter, who I suspected was the manager as well, was so freaking rude that it ruined our whole dining experience. So if you're rich and plan on buying a lot of drinks, I could say go to the Cactus Café, or I could say go to Spain where you'll have a lot more fun. Cactus Café, I still got my trigger fingers.



The
privilege of
the visitor is
newness in a city
so old it doesn't
even
remember itself.