MICHAEL WHITE

Restaurant reviews
For the Santa Fe New Mexican
Written during Fall-Winter 2000

Back Street Bistro ................................................................. 2
Baja Tacos ........................................................................ 3
Counter Culture.................................................................. 4
Noon Whistle ..................................................................... 5
Second Street Bistro .......................................................... 6
Steaksmith .......................................................................... 7
Tia Sophia’s ........................................................................ 8
Tomasita’s ........................................................................... 9
Yin Yang ........................................................................... 10
A t Back Street Bistro it's all about soup — impeccably prepared, immensely satisfying and boldly flavored soup. Soups for vegans, soups for meat eaters, cold soups, hot soups, spicy soups, mild soups, smooth soups, chunky soups, low-fat, high-fat — you can find it all on the daily soup menu at Back Street Bistro.

Don't let the bistro's out-of-the-way location and stark-white warehouse exterior put you off. But do try to go early or late, because during peak lunch hours the bright-red chairs and deliciously painted tables are likely to be filled with throngs of happy soup eaters.

Yet regardless of how packed the restaurant becomes, widely spaced tables, a towering ceiling and cool peached-salmon-colored walls create a pleasant atmosphere. On our visit the restaurant and open kitchen were immaculately clean.

The waitstaff are like a pack of well-mannered hyenas. They prowl the dining room, waiting for someone to finish his iced tea, eat his last bite of soup or put down a menu. Then they pounce, whisking away empty dishes, refilling drinks, answering questions, taking orders — all without being pushy or trying too hard to get the table filled with the next soup-craved customers.

After being immediately seated and pondering the huge array of soup choices, all served with good French bread and real butter, we decided on cups of sweet-pepper bisque and Mexican-cheese-and-corn chowder ($2.35 each). Other choices included mulligatawny, gazpacho, Hungarian mushroom, cucumber, and borscht.

The smooth bisque was redolent of aromatic red peppers and subtle vegetable flavors, and the chowder was rich, hearty, loaded with corn and backed by a powerful pepper kick.

Repeat customers, it is nearly impossible to get bad soup at Back Street Bistro. Numerous awards in local cooking competitions attest to the chef's soupmaking mastery.

Too bad we didn't stop after the soup — our next item were major disappointments. The corned-beef Reuben with Swiss cheese, sauerkraut and mustard (half order $4.50) was made with rye toast that tasted like white bread, sauerkraut with no fermented flavor, and chewy house-made corned beef.

The accompanying potato salad seemed devoid of seasoning and the pickle wedge was mushy. In my companion's roasted-pepper salad with feta and roasted pine nuts ($5.95), long strips of red peppers and nicely browned nuts could not redeem the exceedingly mild feta and ordinary salad greens. For almost $6 we expected the mixed baby greens usually found in comparably priced lunch salads.

Desserts also didn't measure up to the magnificent soups. Key-lime pie ($2.50) was so tart it made my mouth pucker and three-berry cheesecake ($3.95) topped with wilted blueberries, strawberries and raspberries also needed more sugar. The graham-cracker crust in both desserts was soggy.

Despite the merely ordinary sandwiches, salads and desserts, the high-quality soup, rabidly efficient waitstaff, and artistic, roomy and spotless dining room are more than enough to justify putting Back Street Bistro high on your list of lunch destinations.

Lunch for two including tax was $25.91 before tip.

### 333

513 Camino de los Marquez, 982-3500
10 a.m.–2:30 p.m. and Monday–Friday, 11 a.m.–2 p.m. Saturday
No alcohol
Handicapped-accessible
$ • NO CREDIT CARDS
Don’t go to Baja Tacos looking for a delightful patio lunch. The fumes and noise from Cerillos Road combined with the sparest of dirty outside furniture and the tiniest of interiors make this popular fast-food establishment one of Santa Fe’s most unpleasant dining locations.

But who cares, when you can use the drive-through and take away some of the best fast food in town without ever setting foot in the place? The large menu of traditional and vegetarian New Mexican dishes with all-natural ingredients is made to order with a speed that puts other establishments to shame. In fact, after sinking your teeth into one of Baja Tacos’ specialties, the very existence of execrably bland food at such establishments as Taco Bell seems completely imponderable.

On our visit we inhaled two smothered burritos, drowned in green- or red-chile stew (really chile sauce with potato chunks) and served in a somewhat difficult-to-negotiate white Styrofoam box. All items can be topped with generous quantities of lettuce, cheese, tomato, jalapeños and sprouts at no additional charge, but other toppings are slightly extra (guacamole, 50 cents; black olives, 10 cents; sour cream, 30 cents).

My companion’s ground-beef burrito ($4.35) was adequate but nothing special, while my carne adovada burrito ($4.92), filled with nicely shredded and seasoned pork, was well-seasoned and tasty. Of the two stews, we found the red to be much more flavorful and better at keeping the burrito moist than the chunkier green. The stew toppings typified a growing Santa Fe trend toward disappointingly mild chile—neither induced hiccupps or made us break a sweat.

For tidy diners, burritos come in convenient handheld versions with no toppings.

Although it does allow for lightning-fast production, Baja’s assembly method for burritos also limits food quality. The cook fills the tortilla and tops it with sauce and condiments without heating it. Consequently the cheese doesn’t melt, and neither of our burritos was hot enough. A switch to ovenproof containers and a quick blast under the broiler would solve this problem.

We also tried three moderately successful side dishes. The fish taco ($1.95), though advertised as being served with a blue-corn tortilla, came in a disappointing and prefabricated hard yellow-corn shell. The fried cod was crisp and appropriate, but the tantalizing fish topping needed improvement, and shredded cabbage would have been better than lettuce. A counter attendant said they were still perfecting this taco, including the tortilla choice. Our releno ($1.75), although quite greasy, was crisp and full of molten cheese. Spicy pork filling nearly bursting out of its confines was the highlight of the moist tamale ($1.35).

Baja Tacos is cheap but not ridiculously so.

Spicy pork filling nearly bursting out of its confines was the highlight of the moist tamale.

Nearly $5 for a carne adovada burrito served with firmy plastic silverware in such a minimalist atmosphere is almost enough to raise an eyebrow, but many dishes under $4 also exist. French fries, served plain or with chile and/or cheese, are the only non-New Mexican item. Drink prices are moderate (try the good lemonade, $1.25 for large size). Service is competent but not friendly. But at a taco stand, all you really want is to get in and out as fast as possible, and the staff certainly accomplishes that goal.

Lunch for two cost $16.58 including tax.

Baja has a daily dinnertime “happy hour,” 5:30-6:30 p.m., when most menu items are discounted 25 percent.
Finding a restaurant that serves a reasonably priced, well-prepared and interesting lunch in a pleasing atmosphere is like finding a Tiffany lamp at a garage sale. You know it's out there but you have to wade through a lot of dilapidated Barcaloungers to find it.

Counter Culture is tantalizingly close to being just such a find.

The restaurant is airy and cool. A dropped ceiling edged in brushed stainless steel meanders above the counter areas. Small modern paintings complement the pale-yellow walls, gray concrete floor, and an eclectic mix of lightweight laminate and heavy wood furniture.

The menu written on a large blackboard offers a selection of salads and sandwiches diverse enough to satisfy both conservative and adventurous eaters. Salads range from the familiar Caesar to a Mediterranean plate with spanakopita, hummus, olives, Greek salad and pita. Sandwiches include such standbys as egg salad but tend toward the exotic.

Our counter server was knowledgeable and readily answered all menu questions. Once an order is placed, the diner takes a whimsical wire pedestal with a number perched on top to his table and picks up silverware and napkins along the way. A server brings drinks and food.

My hibiscus-and-cranberry iced tea ($1.25 with free refills) was the perfect antidote to the baking-hot afternoon and should not be missed. My companion, an eminent summer-beverage connoisseur, found his lemonade ($1.75) ordinary and I agreed.

costly ingredients. Cooks lavishly dressed the salad with cheese and nuts.

We also tried a bowl of Chicken Tom Yum soup ($3.75), one of the daily specials. The hearty Thai-style soup, based on a mild red-chile broth, came loaded with thin noodles, sliced chicken and a generous side of bread and butter.

Aggressive ginger, lime and lemongrass seasonings were pleasantly refreshing. Unfortunately 2-inch-long pieces of lemongrass, a hodge of lime leaves and an immense slice of ginger made the soup-eating experience challenging.

My grilled-portobello sandwich with fresh mozzarella and red peppers ($6.95), although hot and moist, was bland and needed better seasoning and a more flavorful cheese.

On the other hand, my companion's grilled-prosciutto sandwich with provolone, red peppers and Dijon aioli, served with haystack fries, ($5.25) was exceptional. The grilled ham had a slightly nutty flavor that melded well with the cheese and aioli. The haystack fries formed a towering mound of light, crisp and appropriately browned potatoes, and were some of the best I've eaten in Santa Fe.

Counter Culture needs some improvements to reach lunch perfection. The anemic and slightly crumbly bread is a disappointment considering the high quality of the other ingredients. My fork, the sole occupant of a self-service jar, was dirty and the remainder of the silverware was covered with water spots.

Restrooms were not especially clean.

But when biting into the stellar prosciutto sandwich, none of that seemed to matter much.

Lunch for two before tip was $26.47 tax included.
By Michael White
For The New Mexican

Santa Fe is either blessed or cursed, depending on your perspective, with a burgeoning maneriege of lunch spots featuring grilled portobello mushrooms, roasted red peppers, garlic aioli — in short, the latest bromides of modern cooking. Creativity and novelty are usually welcome additions to any menu, but every now and then I’m just not in the mood for bitter greens or shaved parmesan on anything, much less a sandwich.

That’s when I head to the Noon Whistle. When I was in grade school, I loved going to the restaurant’s previous location, in El Centro Mall. Why? Because it served the kind of food my mom would have made if she hadn’t been working all day: simple soups, sandwiches and desserts prepared from good ingredients.

In its current location in an easy-to-miss plain adobe on Alameda Street, just west of Guadalupe Street, Noon Whistle still serves the same kind of food in a quirky one-room establishment filled with sturdy wood furniture, a plain brown carpet and shrink-wrapped posters of local arts festivals.

An eclectic mix of slick businessmen, bejeweled tourists and locals crowd the place, making it sometimes difficult to find a table during peak lunch hours. The atmosphere, with customers coming in and out, placing and picking up orders at the counter and busing their own tables, can be frenetic.

The spartan furnishings and a minimal staff keep prices incredibly low — a cup of soup is $1.30, 10 of the sandwiches cost $5 or less, and brownies are just $0.65. The menu lists classic lunch fare of hot and cold sandwiches, burgers (including ostrich, the only menu oddball), a few salads, daily soup specials, drinks and desserts.

Most items are so basic that there’s very little that could go seriously wrong. The sub ($5) is nothing more than a generous stack of salami, ham and Swiss cheese topped with a piece of red leaf lettuce and a couple of tomato slices inside an ordinary hoagie roll. It was not particularly creative, or even interesting, but it sure was satisfying.

The New Club ($5.25), a hot sandwich with turkey, bacon and Jack cheese, was adequate if a tad skimpy. From what we could see on passing diners’ trays, that was a consistent pattern — cold sandwiches seemed to be piled a bit higher than their hot counterparts.

I feared salads would be packaged iceberg lettuce, but the garden salad bowl ($3) proved me wrong. The heap- ing bowl of red and green leaf lettuce, chopped celery and croutons topped with artistically arranged tomato slices, was refreshing — just the kind of dependable fare you wish you could find at roadside diners.

That’s not to say that everything is spectacularly good. My companion’s green-pea soup was thin and overloaded with marjoram, and my green-chile chicken soup with cheese, while almost a meal in itself, contained abundant bits of unpleasant chicken skin.

Desserts reminded me of a grade-school bake sale. While clearly homemade, they looked slightly damaged and generally lacked a taste worth the calories. The brownie was dry and barely activated my chocolate receptors; the chocolate-chip cookie was brittle and tasted stale; and the pecan pie, though happily not too sweet, had a chunky filling that looked cuddled. However, you’re unlikely to find pie perfection anywhere in Santa Fe for $1.75 a slice.

Lunch for two — including two half sandwiches, two soups, one salad, three desserts and two drinks — with tax came to $17.51. Tipping is not required.

---

451 W. Alameda St., 988-2636
10 a.m.-3 p.m. Monday-Friday
Local checks only
$ • NO CREDIT CARDS

MICHAEL WHITE
RESTAURANT REVIEWS FROM PASATIEMPO
ENTERTAINMENT SECTION OF THE SANTA FE NEW MEXICAN
FALL-WINTER 2000
By Michael White
For The New Mexican

Live music ranging from jazz duos to Celtic jam sessions is the second-best reason to visit Second Street Brewery. Excellent bands playing just inches from diners create an intimate club feeling without drowning out conversation.

Touche is a corner jammed with Irish memorabilia, a towering mural and rotating art exhibits lend a publike atmosphere with a funky twist to the potentially sterile warehouse building. Well off the beaten path, Second Street is a true local hangout, where Santa Fe gladiator are rarer than bikinis at the North Pole.

Glistening brewing equipment behind the bar advertises the best reason to visit Second Street: beer. Regulars include India Pale Ale, Extra Special Bitter, Cream Stout and Golden Ale, with seasonal beers like Bohemian Pilsner making occasional appearances.

Although the beer is always good, some brews, especially the seasonal varieties, stray from recognized styles. Consistency on the four standard brews is improving, but you may still find yourself wondering if this is the same beer you had last month.

Second Street has nearly perfected the atmosphere, entertainment and drinks for a great neighborhood pub. If only the comestibles (food) were better. I'd visit once a week instead of once a month. If careful you can find acceptable fare. Weekday specials like lamb shepherd's pie (Tuesday), chicken pot pie (Wednesday), and the chicken and black bean burrito (Friday) are standouts. Burgers, both meat and vegetarian, are satisfying if unremarkable. The jerk chicken sandwich is good but lacks the expected spiciness.

Avoid anything that once swam. On our visit the fish and chips had a greasy, acrid and almost burned breading with a mushy interior. The Salmon Cakes Feast, consisting of three tiny, fishy-tasting disks, was bland and meager, while cardboard-thin trout fillets seemed a day past fresh and came with ordinary long-grain rice, not wild rice, as listed. And a cold, chewy hunk of fish with no detectable seasoning doomed the ah-poached salmon salad.

Pub standbys were little better. The kitchen cooked the London broil well beyond the requested medium rare, and the meat didn't benefit from gluey mashed potatoes and salty gravy. An herb-roasted half-chicken was marred by a complete lack of herbs and overcooking.

Salads, both as sides and as entrees, are forgettable. The Danish Bleu and Walnut Salad, for example, received only a hint of cheese, contained pecans not walnuts and came with a dreadfully sweet raspberry-lemon vinaigrette.

Luckily the french fries were good enough to absolve many of Second Street's faults. The dark brown and wonderfully crisp green chile and cheese fries were even good after they endured a five-minute wait under the heat lamp. But don't stray to the beer-battered onion rings — the portion listed as a "boat full" is skimpy and not tasty enough to justify the indulgence.

Desserts seemed like an afterthought. If not chilled to arctic levels, the layered chocolate cake might have been good, but as it was, the filling was like putty and the chocolate flavors were terribly muted. Carrot cake was better but overpriced at $4.50 a slice.

Our waitress managed our party of nine fairly competently but missed some drink orders. Worse, entrees emerged sporadically over 15 minutes. It was a bustling evening, but surely coordination with the kitchen could be improved.

In spite of disappointing food, Second Street can be huge fun. My advice? Pick up some friends, hear some good music, and have a pint and an order of fries. If you must eat dinner, get a burger or one of the daily specials.

A large dinner for two, including a salad and two each of appetizers, entrees, desserts and beer, was $51.28 before tip.

+++ 3181 2nd St. 892-3030
11 a.m.-10 p.m. Monday-Thursday;
11 a.m.-11 p.m. Friday & Saturday;
noon-10 p.m. Sunday
Bar 11 a.m.-midnight Monday-Saturday,
noon-10:30 p.m. Sunday
Beer & wine
Handicapped-accessible
Local checks only
$ • ALL CREDIT CARDS
I spent the better part of the last seven years in Missoula, Mont. While certainly the crushing victor in any Montana cultural contest, Missoula is a restaurant wasteland. "It's not bad" is the classic recommendation. In fact, the only restaurants in western Montana consistently engendering positive comments are its steak houses.

Yet I was never all that impressed with those places' arbitrarily cooked planks of questionable meat, watery salads, mushy baked potatoes and aging shrimp cocktails. But since everyone else seemed to like the food, over the years I started to wonder if I were the problem.

A recent visit to Steaksmith confirmed that I was right all along. Steaksmith is a glorious example of a restaurant in which all the minute details that produce a memorable meal, not just a namesake dish, are obsessively considered.

The atmosphere is casual and slightly clubby, warm and welcoming. But behind the understated Southwestern decor lies a carefully thought-out floor plan with ideal seating for romantic couples, noisy families and large private parties.

Our waiter mirrored the ambience and joked with us without crashing headlong into obnoxious and phony tip-trawling. Even better, his encyclopedic knowledge of the restaurant included the myriad seafood sources and the kitchen's cooking techniques.

No need to ask for an extra spoon to share a dessert or a finger bowl for messy food — he anticipated everything. And, in an almost unheard-of act, he refilled our glasses from a bottle of teasingly robust 1998 Coppola Merlot, which he'd accurately described as a complementary match for our entrées.

On his recommendation we started with a trio of sumptuous appetizers. The grilled shrimp stuffed with pesto, wrapped in prosciutto and laid on a bed of thick pesto cream sauce were a mesmerizing combination of sweet flavors. Sadly, the order contained just three shrimp. I mourned their rapid passing, but the pain was assuaged by the sushi-quality grilled yellowfin tuna skewers, blissfully cooked black-and-blue as ordered. The accompanying synapse-explooding mustard sauce was a surprisingly good addition.

French onion soup is a Steaksmith specialty. The steaming crock thick with a horde of diaphanous onion, a bold stock, a crunchy piece of toast and oozing, bubbling cheese is worth the trip.

Surf and turf is like summer rain in New Mexico — always a good thing. Among Steakssmith's land-and-sea choices are the T-bone, sirloin, fillet, scallops, shrimp and lobster. Although the menu lists several combinations, personal creations are encouraged.

Our combinations of petite fillet with scallops and sirloin with lobster proved simple and succinct. The shellfish was cooked until just done, and both steaks were high-quality cuts savagely and deliciously blackened on the outside and succulently tender on the inside. Considering the outstanding aroma, taste and texture, you'd never know that Steaksmith uses some frozen seafood.

Stray from the beaten menu path, and you're apt to hit some additional gems. Ribs, a bit sweet for my taste, were nonetheless tender and of a sufficiently towering size to defeat all but the most voracious diners. Whole fresh trout stuffed with scallops and shrimp was cooked until slightly flaky and thoroughly delectable.

Steaksmith includes generous side dishes. Hot, homemade bread with butter is automatic. From the starters, unless you're dying for greenery, opt for the well-made soup over the merely good salads. The choice between the baked potato with sour cream, butter and chives and the fragrant exotic Indonesian rice is a bitter conundrum best resolved by ordering both and sharing.

Everyone in our party had arrived teetering on the precipice of eulogizing starvation, leaving us with the capacity to appreciate dessert. Missing it would have been a tragedy.

Our recommendations? The unusual and unusually stunning apple pie, made with pre-baked apples, bound with a custardlike sour cream filling and topped with a crisp streusel. Or the velvety orange-scented chocolate mousse. Or the ethereal chocolate cheesecake enshrinéd in thin chocolate wafer crust.

Dinner for two, including soup and two each of appetizers, entrées, desserts, soft drinks and a half-bottle of wine, was $92.90 with tax, before tip.

Old Las Vegas Highway at El Gancho, 988-3333
Dinner 5:30-10 p.m. Monday-Saturday,
5-10 p.m. Sunday, lounge 4-10 p.m. daily
Full bar
Handicapped-accessible
Local checks
$$ • ALL CREDIT CARDS
By Michael White
For The New Mexican

Culinary tours of New Mexican restaurants in Santa Fe inevitably contain several regulars alongside the many transient eateries.

Since May 1975, when it opened at a West San Francisco Street site previously occupied by a Chinese restaurant, Tia Sophia’s (Aunt Sophia’s) has been a fixture on nearly all such lists. Tia’s mix of traditional New Mexican food and enough American menu items to satisfy children and chilephobes immediately drew hungry crowds that persist to this day.

Tia Sophia’s moved across the street into a plain brown stucco building in 1984. But don’t let the calm exterior fool you. Behind the door looms a teeming stew of tourists and local residents.

After a wait of a few minutes to a half-hour, a server seats you at either a vinyl-clad table or a somewhat uncomfortable straight-backed wooden booth. Lone diners can sit at the bar looking into the central busing area.

A large collection of sombreros, rugs, Hispanic artworks and lovely black-and-white photographs decorates the dining area. The beat-up booths add to the atmosphere but the soiled blue carpet does not. The floor also was regrettable littered with bits of paper and food.

The Tia Sophia’s waitstaff was simply outstanding. Service was fast and efficient without being brusque. Orders were taken as soon as we closed our menus, drinks were refilled promptly, and the check, payable at the cash register, appeared before the meal ended.

From the wide selection of New Mexican dishes, we chose the gargantuan Santa Fe plate (cheese enchilada, beef taco, tamale, posole, beans and rice, $7.95), a small combo (blue-corn cheese enchilada and relleno, $5.95) and the Monday special (roast-beef burrito, $6.25).

Based on the dishes we sampled, Tia Sophia’s will satisfy most chile cravings but lackluster seasoning and a focus on speed marred the overall food quality. The cheese in the enchiladas and on the tamale was unmelted and thoroughly unappetizing. Two more minutes in the oven would have produced a much better lunch.

While the tender beans, adrift in a pool of cooking juices, were a standout among the side dishes, posole and rice were bland, as was the standard beef taco with cheese, lettuce and tomato. Iced tea ($1.25) and lemonade ($1.50) tasted institutional.

Other items fared better. Our roast-beef burrito, jam-packed with meltingly tender slices of juicy beef, was far superior to the more common ground-beef version. The relleno on the small combination plate was crisp and tasted homemade.

Bed- and green-chile sauces were fine renditions, the red having a pronounced and pleasing acidity. Given the menu warning, “Not responsible for too-hot chile,” both sauces were surprisingly mild.

Diners seeking to avoid runny noses can find solace in burgers and fries while children can opt for safe items including grilled cheese in a tortilla, peanut butter and jelly, or for the truly unadventurous, a sliced banana.

Don’t go looking for a lazy lunch with a margarita-and-guacamole starter. Tia Sophia’s focuses on main dishes.

But if you’re looking for an extensive choice of New Mexican food in an authentic Santa Fe atmosphere, take a healthy appetite and some patient friends and head for Tia Sophia’s. Just hope the cook isn’t too rushed.

Lunch for two including tax was $17.65 before tip.

TIA SOPHIA’S

210 W San Francisco St., 983-9880
7 a.m.-2 p.m. Monday-Saturday
No alcohol
No reservations
No personal checks
Handicapped-accessible
$ * MC * V

---

MICHAEL WHITE
RESTAURANT REVIEWS FROM PASATIEMPO
ENTERTAINMENT SECTION OF THE SANTA FE NEW MEXICAN
FALL-WINTER 2000
Great restaurants and great baseball players have a lot in common. Most famous players are known for a particular genius—a blazing fastball, towering home runs, a magical glove or felonious base-stealing abilities. With most celebrity restaurants, the root of fame also relates to a few superlatives. Incredible seafood. Great wine list. Irresistible desserts.

Sometimes, however rarely,fielding, batting and running talents are so effortlessly and seamlessly balanced that players are remembered for no particular skill, but rather, like Joe DiMaggio, for being great ballplayers.

Tomatsita’s is like DiMaggio. Nothing it does is the best, but everything works so well together that exceptional experiences materialize without individually miraculous elements.

Housed in the Santa Fe station of the famous Chile Line railroad, Tomatsita’s is unusually charismatic. The restaurant has trappings of great popularity—a private parking lot, pagers notifying waiting diners, and Formula 1 speed—but charming atmosphere, jovial waitstaff and a straightforward menu blissfully unaffected by increased production render the establishment’s technical prowess almost unnoticeable and certainly unobjectionable.

Unlike on summer evenings when at least a half-hour wait is usual, we were immediately seated on a recent Monday night visit. Our original location next to the mainstring of a small busing area promised less than spectacular conversation. Upon request, the hostess cheerfully relocated us to an intimate two-person booth.

Once we had settled in, our young, friendly and highly effective waiter immediately took our drink order of two Grand Gold margaritas ($5 each). Beware. The delicious margaritas, although fairly mild tasting, pack a serious wallop and almost incapacitated my unsuspecting companion.

The menu is largely confined to Southwestern standbys, and Tomatsita’s generally excels in presenting them as the simple, homely dishes they really are.

We started with a guacamole salad that was a bit small for the price ($4.50), and although fresh, would have benefited from more lemon and less garlic. The tortilla soup ($1.95), a hybrid between chicken posole and cowboy beans, came with a slice of fresh lime and a hearty, satisfying taste.

My companion’s dauntingly large Monday special ($9.95), consisting of a cheese enchilada, a pork tamale, a beef taco, Spanish rice and refried beans, was a triumphant display of Southwestern cooking.

The green-chile smothered enchilada oozed enough cheese to shock a Wisconsin native; the well-steamed tamale was paired flawlessly with red-chile sauce; the lump taco filled with meat that actually had been seasoned thoughtfully, not merely cooked. If the rice hadn’t tasted of canned tomatoes, the dish would’ve been perfect.

House-made relenos ($7.95) were a lesser success. Although tasty and large, the chiles were tough and could have used more cheese. As always, the warm chile sauce quickly softened the originally crisp breading. Couldn’t some maverick reloño cook put the chiles on top of rather than under the sauce?

Sepaipillas are the glorious oddball of Southwestern cooking, Tomatsita’s sopaiolla version is a masterfully light, crisp, golden balloon aching to bask in sweet honey or soak up remnant chile morsels.

Attention to detail and side dishes extends to desserts that are clearly more than a husky afterthought. The bourbon pecan pie ($3.25), baked in a straight-sided tart pan, is nicely balanced between a deliciously boozy filling and a thick, sandy crust. Fluffy homemade pinto cheesecake ($2.95) wallows happily in a puddle of caramel sauce but could use more of its namesake nuts.

Tomatsita’s hasn’t perfected everything. Food runners regularly don’t know a plate’s destination, lighting is overly dim and the main dining room can be too loud. Perhaps most seriously, the chile sauces, like most in Santa Fe, are alarmingly mild.

Dinner for two with tax was $43.16 before tip. Not many Santa Fe restaurants with Tomatsita’s fame can offer consistently good dining experiences for so little.

\[\begin{array}{c}
\text{MICHAEL WHITE} \\
\text{RESTAURANT REVIEWS FROM PASATIEMPO} \\
\text{ENTERTAINMENT SECTION OF THE SANTA FE NEW MEXICAN} \\
\text{FALL-WINTER 2000}
\end{array}\]
By Michael White
For The New Mexican

Chinese restaurants in America tend to be either lavishly opulent or extremely minimalist — either way, you know whether to expect gorgeous garnishes and exquisite hand-formed dumplings or just a massive pile of Kung Pao. Yin Yang, located in the eastern end of the Design Center, has elements of elegance in both atmosphere and food, but generally falls between the two extremes.

Past the glass entry doors, Yin Yang expands beneath an airy ceiling into a long dining room divided into a large section on the main floor and a cozy raised area in one corner. Decor elements suggest either a cheap-fix eatery or a fine-dining restaurant. The white tablecloths, red lanterns, paper dragons and good collection of Asian artwork are attractive but clash somewhat with the industrial white-painted wood beam ceiling and the same brown tile floor found on the main floor of the Design Center. Yet despite the inconsistencies, the disparate design elements somehow combine to create a simultaneously stylish and funky atmosphere.

The extensive menu, divided into appetizers, soups, chef’s specialties and seafood, poultry, beef, pork and vegetarian entrées, is appealing and moderately priced. Standbys like Peking duck and lo mein are present, accompanied by numerous eclectic choices, such as spicy crispy whole fish. Most entrées range from $7 to $9, and none exceeds $13.50. Plum wine, sake and a limited wine and beer selection is available.

The first item we ordered was the sizzling rice soup ($3.95 for two). Its light broth filled with shrimp, chicken and crispy cooked vegetables, topped with blazing-hot crisp rice at the table, was satisfying and brimming with fresh, well-balanced ingredients. Yet the soup seemed virtually unseasoned and could easily have been found in any American diner.

Next we tried the pot stickers ($4.25). While nicely browned and generously stuffed with a faintly sweet filling, this appetizer was at best innocuously flavored. Though it wasn’t bad, it also wasn’t worth ordering twice. Served on half a head of graying sliced iceberg lettuce, the pot stickers began the evening’s trend toward bizarre garnishing.

General Tao’s chicken ($8.95), described as stir-fried with ginger and garlic sauce and listed as hot and spicy, tasted of neither garlic nor ginger, and although it came with a few lonely red peppers, was as mild as the soup. Fully half the plate consisted of a bushy parsley forest and a huge daikon flower dyed fluorescent orange. Yet despite its overly thickened, too-sweet sauce, the chicken was better than what followed.

Royal Fantasy ($12.95), a sauté of scallops, lobster and various vegetables in a wine sauce, was marred by old-tasting, mealy scallops and a tough, probably overcooked large-size lobster split lengthwise and served in its shell. Most of the vegetables were appropriately cooked and tasty, but the baby corn left a foul aftertaste. Excepting its purple daikon flower, Royal Fantasy was, like the rest of the meal, bland and uninteresting and did not even taste of wine. Such delicate ingredients as scallops and lobster do better with some seasoning.

Yin Yang would greatly improve with some culinary holdovers. Excepting the baby corn and seafood (admittedly an optimistic choice on our part), ingredients were of good quality, yet the resulting dishes could barely pass as Chinese. Aggressive flavors in every dish can be overpowering, but a global lack of seasoning can become equally wearying, especially in a cuisine better known for its more intense tastes.

Service is enthusiastic and generally competent, though not always a reliable information source. Skeptical about but intrigued by the Royal Fantasy, I asked for an opinion and was told it was a good choice. Results were otherwise. Better to stick with your first instinct and perhaps avoid seafood items.

Dinner for two was $37.05 with tax, before tip.

418 Cerrillos Road, 986-9279.
Monday-Friday 11:30 a.m.-9:15 p.m. (lunch buffet 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m.), Saturday-Sunday 12:30 p.m.-9:15 p.m.
Wine & beer
Reservations for groups larger than three
Handicapped-Accessible
$ • ALL CREDIT CARDS