

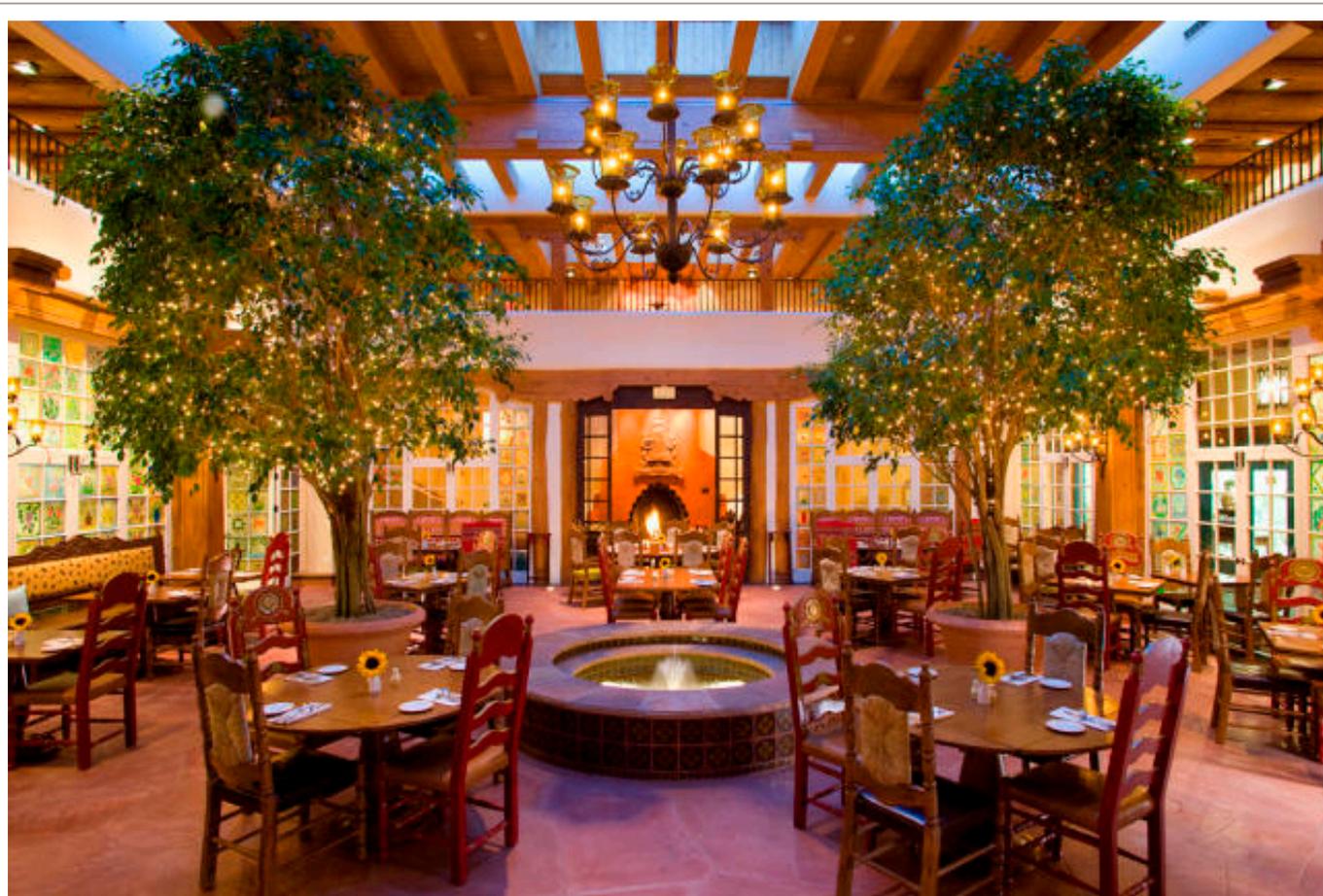
La Plazuela offers beautiful, delicious courtyard dining

Karen Peterson / For the Journal

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — Whether you are new to Santa Fe, a long-time resident or even a native, La Fonda just feels like home. How wonderful, then, that the hotel's La Plazuela restaurant, in the interior courtyard, is also such a good place to eat.

As you'd expect for a major downtown hotel, La Plazuela serves nearly all day long. We opted for lunch and were very happy to tell our guests to meet us in the heart of Santa Fe Style: La Fonda's lobby.

Sitting
there,
on the



La Plazuela restaurant at La Fonda on the Plaza offers a bright patio ambiance indoors. (Courtesy of La Fonda on the Plaza)

comfortable couch, I recalled my parents, who rendezvoused in this same lobby nearly seven decades ago. It's a wonderful step from those dim and cool surroundings – thick walls, big furniture and lofty vigas – to the brightly sunlit and intimate courtyard where meals are served.

A nicely picante salsa and warm tortilla chips arrived promptly to the table while we scanned the menu. We opted for the crab cake appetizer (\$16) and were very pleased with the choice. The four little cakes, crisply fried and already laced with julienned red pepper, were tasty enough even before we explored the two dipping sauces. The tomato salsa carried a cilantro punch, as did the lemony aioli. A radish sprout garnish added visual interest.

My guest couldn't decide if she wanted traditional New Mexican fare or something more elaborate. A note: La Fonda maintains a lunchtime buffet of local dishes in the adjacent bar and the waitress confirmed that ordering a combination

plate in La Plazuela means you are served from that buffet.

LA PLAZUELA

LOCATION: 100 E. San Francisco St., in La Fonda

995-2234, lafondasantafe.com

HOURS: Daily, breakfast 7-11:30 a.m.; lunch 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m., until 3 p.m. Sat-Sun.; dinner 5-10 p.m.

FOOD: Imaginative New Mexican

AMBIANCE: Iconic

SERVICE: Very good

Full bar

Thus, we chose the carne asada (\$19) off the restaurant's standing lunch menu and got the best of both worlds: freshly grilled tenderloin plus a cheese enchilada and refried beans on the side. The enchilada and beans were tasty, if standard.

But the steak was truly excellent: medium rare as ordered, generous and tender. Better yet, it came on a bed of green chile strips (rajas) and cream. The chile was very flavorful and not too hot. Perfect!

I opted for another menu standard, the pan-fried trout (\$21). It was dusted in blue cornmeal and perfectly cooked. The accompanying mango-avocado salsa was a little sweet and bland for my taste – I would have liked something crunchier to contrast with the soft white trout, and maybe a little jazzier in flavor. Mango is wonderful, so is avocado. But both are, like the trout, soft and bland.

The vegetable sides, however, were stellar. Grilled asparagus took center stage: spears just fat enough to stand up to the grill, but not overgrown. I had to fight off my guest's roving fork to protect them. And the medley of Yukon gold and Peruvian purple baby potatoes was a colorful addition.

My guest never misses a chance to sample flan if it's on the menu. It was (\$8) and we got it. La Fonda's version is very good, if standard, and included a generous scattering of fresh berries with mint.

In a more adventurous mood, I tried the raspberry enchiladas (\$9). Think crepes filled with pureed fresh raspberries and mascarpone cheese. Seasonal, rich, good. And unusual. This might be the place to note that all the dishes we sampled were especially well presented, starting with those perfect little crab cakes, and ending with the tawny crepe swaddling berries and creamy cheese.

Because it's in a hotel and because it's in the very heart of downtown, we'd bet La Plazuela gets overlooked by many Santa Fe residents, both newly arrived or long established. Big mistake! Parking is easy – just glide into the adjacent parking garage right across from the cathedral. Get the ticket stamped in the restaurant and your parking is free – a big deal for the heart of downtown.

Then revel in close on 90 years of stylistic history, and good food besides.