

# COLTER'S GHOST

La Plazuela manages a perfect renovation and one hell of a posole.

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Remember when La Plazuela restaurant—the house eatery for La Fonda hotel—was like an all-terrain skate bowl? Stepping from the lobby into the dining room was like entering a lopsided universe of chunky stone that drained toward a rocky vortex at the center. Not only was sure footing unlikely, but tables, plates and drinks listed with the tilt of the bowl. It was like eating in a dramatic, frozen ocean. No longer.

The renovated La Plazuela has managed to simultaneously level its floor and keep its charm (no mean feat when compared to other recent hotel renovations—cough—Hotel St. Francis—cough).

An Oct. 9 review of La Plazuela in The Santa Fe New Mexican's Pasatiempo noted the capable renovation at the hands of local architect Barbara Felix. While the review mentioned John Gaw Meem—more or less the godfather of Santa Fe architecture—it criminally ignored the work of Mary Jane Colter. Meem was responsible for a 1929 remodel and

expansion of the hotel, and several other notable architects worked on it in the decades following, but Colter did the interior, as she did for many Harvey House properties. Colter was no decorator, but an accomplished architect, and the soul of La Plazuela must be counted in her legacy rather than in Meem's.

Felix's renovation is an exercise in preserving the integrity of what Colter originally designed as an open courtyard space. Like Colter did originally, Felix used local artisans, such as Ward Brinegar of Harmony Forge, for all the custom craft work. Doors, chandeliers, sconces, woodwork, tile—all of it was locally sourced and constructed through largely traditional means. Brinegar worked his anvil 36 hours per week for five months straight in order to forge the iron railings.

Better yet, executive chef Lane Warner's menu is perfectly comfortable within the painstakingly renovated restaurant. Pasatiempo recommended ignoring the classic New Mexican fare and going for the more cuisine-y menu items. Again, I'll have to disagree. There's nothing wrong with, for example, Warner's roasted pork loin. It comes with a

perfectly textured cheddar cheese polenta—it will slice or crumble depending on how you wield your fork—and a classic tomatillo salsa. The roast itself is moist and flavorful enough not to need the mango-jalapeno glaze, but the addition provides a welcome duet that makes the whole richer than the sum of its parts.

But warning people to steer clear of, say, the beer-battered chile rellenos is not only unfair, it feels out of character with the local, artisanal spirit. Why go to La Plazuela to admire the chandelier glass, hand-blown in Guadalajara, or the painstakingly crafted woodwork churned out by Armijo Design in Santa Fe, and then order something you can get a variation on by any decent chef between here and Des Moines?

Especially when the rellenos at La Plazuela are no-thank-you-Grandma-I'm-going-to-have-chef-Warner's-rellenos-instead good. The attributes: made from hulking green chiles, perfectly battered yet still crisp underneath, stuffed with a trio of Mexican cheeses, slathered in properly hot—but still flavorful—chile, accompanied with pico de gallo and guacamole. The negatives: um, so



You'd have to be a bigger man than me to eat La Plazuela's rellenos in one sitting (and I am not small).

big you may not be able to eat it all in one sitting. And the kicker: a pork and red chile posole that is just salty enough to make you realize that you should chase it with Negra Modelo.

I suppose there will always be people who just need to sit down and have a mango gazpacho no matter the surroundings—and I can't blame them. I feel the same way about Bourbon. Plus, the mango gazpacho at La Plazuela, like everything else I've sampled so far, is worlds beyond what might be expected from a hotel restaurant with a captive audience of tourists and hurried businesspeople.

But the ghost of Mary Colter and I will be over in the corner, nursing a beer and savoring the posole.

## LA PLAZUELA

Breakfast, lunch  
and dinner daily

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