The restaurant at the end of the trail

La Plazuela
100 E. San Francisco St. (at La Fonda), 982-5511
Breakfast 7-10:45 a.m. daily; lunch 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m.
Monday-Friday, 11:45 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturday & Sunday; dinner 5:30-10 p.m. daily

Full bar
Takeout available
Noise level: lively bistro moderated
by splashing fountain
Atrium sky view
Handicapped accessible
Credit cards, no checks

Where can you dine on sophisticated fare at surprisingly reasonable prices in the most beautiful Santa Fe style? If you guessed La Plazuela at La Fonda, you’ve been there since the recent renovation. Architect Barbara Felix, who studied the drawings of John Gaw Meem (responsible for the hotel’s remodel in the 1920s), resurrected the central fountain, refashioned the leaking atrium ceiling, and opened the French doors to create a sidewalk-cafe atmosphere. The result is brighter and airier than before, but the charm of the original courtyard remains. Executive chef Lane Warner, in the kitchen since 1993, has updated the menu, too, presenting lighter preparations with more emphasis on local sources. Just when you thought there was no good news in this economy, La Plazuela dropped its dinner prices — yet the level of layered nuance and refinement in many dishes rivals that of restaurants charging considerably more. Classic New Mexican dishes are offered, but I recommend sampling what you won’t find at your favorite chile haunt. Bracingly tasty dishes reflect the conversation between Old World and New World cuisines that is ongoing in Warner’s kitchen.

Mango gazpacho is a sunshine-yellow pool in which green grapes float like lily pads. It sings of fresh mango and cucumber, with a peppery undertone from roasted yellow pepper plus the citrus snap of fresh lime juice. A glass of Grues Blanc de Noirs Brut is the perfect bubbly accompaniment to this fruity medley. The Caesar salad isn’t afraid of anchovy, though the Cotija cheese lacks the sharpness of Parmesan. Your mom’s best buttery-crisp grilled cheese sandwich is updated with unctuous Mexican cheese, though not quite enough green chile, plus a homemade-tasting garlic aioli.

Order the side of perfectly crisp but not greasy sweet-potato fries stuffed with corns of salt to dip in a mildly garlicky mayonnaise. The roasted poblanos are stuffed with sweet corn, leeks, and wild mushrooms, enrobed upon the creamiest of cheese polentas, laced with a smoky tomato coulis, and sent over the rainbow by a reduced balsamic sauce. The layers of flavor in this one dish — smoky and creamy, spicy and earthy, sharp and sweet — could keep your palate happily occupied for a week. This dish embodies the reasons why we dine out.

The tableside-made guacamole is enough for three or four people, which we realized too late, but we couldn’t stop having just one more taste. You choose the ingredients — I recommend the works. For a satisfying appetizer-only meal for two, add the camerones rellenos: cheese-stuffed prawns, the size and sweetness of baby lobster tails, wrapped in smoked, crisp bacon.

The halibut tastes as if you just landed it. It floats on a deep-flavored rice-and-vegetable reef in a savory cilantro butter sauce. I never order chicken out, but when we asked the gracious Gustavo for a recommendation, he went straight to the chicken breast stuffed with New Mexico goat cheese. Another show-stopping complex dish, this delicious update of chicken Kiev is stuffed with goat cheese and wild mushrooms, wrapped in Serrano ham, and then pan-roasted; it’s served with a delicate orange blossom and white truffle sauce (no truffle oil — Gustavo checked). He can be trusted on wine, too. The 2002 Ribera del Duero Callejo Reserva was a deep earthy wine with a very long finish. The restaurant won a 2009 Wine Spectator Award of Excellence for the quality of its list.

Save room for dessert — they are all house made, including the wide selection of ices and ice creams. The slightly deconstructed tres leches cake adds a hieroglyph of salted caramel sauce while the key lime meringue pie nestles in an almond cookie-like pastry. The Mexican flourless chocolate cake hints darkly of cinnamon.

We had a few whines: the chipotle/black-garlic mashed potatoes were slightly dry; the flourless chocolate cake had a coarse texture; and while surprisingly tasty, asparagus and strawberries aren’t seasonal in September. But the artful presentations and meticulous attention to detail in everything from vegetable sides to dessert garnishes is a gauntlet thrown down to other restaurants charging similar prices. Unwind beside the splashing fountain watching clouds overhead or the cast of characters who pass through the world-famous lobby. This is the best of Santa Fe style. •