

Tabla is rich, despite austere ambience

BY ANNE HILLERMAN
For the Journal

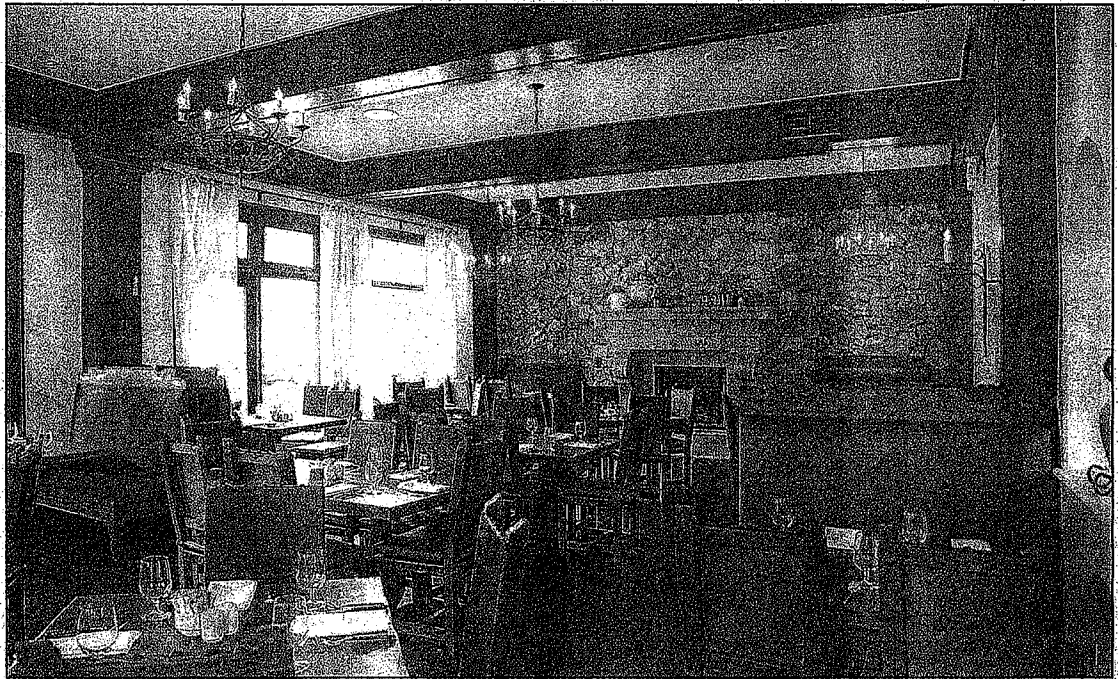
Chef Estevan Garcia has created a great, New Mexican-inspired menu for the newly renovated restaurant at the Hotel St. Francis. The night of our visit, the food and professional service rivaled that at some of Santa Fe's better-known restaurants. Of course, we expected good service since we shared the dining room with only two other customers.

My lack of unfettered enthusiasm for Tabla springs from the chilling ambience, uninviting and austere. The lobby reminds me of a cold European church complete with a stone basin reminiscent of an ancient baptismal font. When folks go out for dinner or a drink, they probably want to celebrate, but nothing of the welcoming, cheerful atmosphere of the old St. Francis remains. The hotel definitely needed an update, but this monotone incarnation lacks any hint of charm.

Chef Garcia's food, however, is as much an improvement from the old kitchen as the new ambience is disappointing. Don't be afraid to venture on to the dining room.

The Web site describes the cuisine as "delectable food based on the rich traditions of New Mexico and the freshest ingredients available from the local farmer's market." The night my friends and I ate here, the quality of our food, the attractiveness of presentation, moderate but ample serving sizes and freshness of ingredients combined to create an experience close to impeccable. Chef Garcia takes the elements of traditional northern New Mexican cuisine and makes them sparkle.

The menu features simple dishes and culinary creations that are more complex. We started with a shared order of carne adovada ravioli (\$11), a delicious cross-cultural experience. Inside the three large soft, plump Italian-style ravioli lay a filling of tender, shredded pork marinated in red chile with



COURTESY OF HOTEL ST. FRANCIS

Tabla de los Santos is the newly renovated restaurant in Hotel St. Francis.

Tabla de los Santos

★★★

LOCATION: Hotel St. Francis, 210 Don Gaspar, Santa Fe, 505-983-5700

HOURS: Breakfast 7:30 a.m.-10:30 a.m. Mondays-Saturdays, 7:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m. Sundays; lunch 11 a.m.-2 p.m. daily; dinner 5 p.m.-9 p.m. Sundays-Thursdays and until 10 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays

FULL BAR

enough good New Mexican spice to make things interesting. With three raviolis and four guests, the waiter could have used the opportunity to sell us an extra, but he didn't mention it and we didn't realize we'd have to do the fancy math until the plate arrived. (It was the only oversight in an evening of fine service.)

We also shared the Ensalada Repollo de las Nubes (\$10). On the menu,

the chef writes that the recipe came from his experience making this warm red cabbage salad as a Franciscan monk. You usually don't find "cabbage" and "exquisite" in the same sentence, but this combination of thinly sliced cabbage, sparked with smoked bacon and creamy, pungent Roquefort cheese, and finished with just a touch of olive oil and vinegar, created pure magic.

Entrée choices include a combination plate with a pork tamale, cheese enchilada and a sopaipilla stuffed not with the usually combo of ground beef and rice but with bean and chicos, sweet dried corn native to northern New Mexico home cooking. Our waiter highly recommended the Niman Ranch Pork Chop marinated in red chile and the aged Angus rib-eye steak (each \$28). We opted instead for lighter fare.

The evening's special, a delightful presentation of two grilled quail (\$27) cooked perfectly so the meat remained juicy, deserves a gold star. The delicious Rainbow Trout (\$22) was pan

fried in butter and seasoned with lemon juice, a touch of garlic and a sprinkling of fresh parsley, served with fresh spinach and sautéed potatoes. The poblano chile relleno, unlike its battered-and-fried cousins, sat happily in its natural green skin. Inside, we enjoyed the mixtures of soft rice, fresh spinach and mild melted goat cheese. The chile sat surrounded by a moat of stunningly red warm sauce that tasted like fresh tomatoes. I had only one quibble: \$21 was too much to pay for this single chile, however tasty.

I loved the grilled lamb and the option the menu offers of one chop or two (\$18 or \$28). The meat, from the Talus Wind Ranch in Galisteo, arrived tender and cooked a perfect medium as requested. The peppercorn glaze added a whisper of spiciness, and the roasted potatoes made it a fine meal. The menu also includes "tamalitos" or small tamales, organic chicken with red chile; and three mini burgers — beef, buffalo and lamb.

We barely saved room for dessert, but we had to try

flan. At Chef Garcia's earlier restaurant, Café Estevan, the flan rose to levels of gourmet excellence, and the same is true here. I love this goat milk variation: sweet but not too sweet, smooth, and simultaneously light and rich. Amazingly good. (\$8.50 is a lot to pay for a small serving of dessert, however excellent.) The dessert menu also includes classic Tres Leches cake, a chocolate almond torte and a chocolate cake described as "the ultimate dessert."

Our dinner for four — four entrées, two appetizers and a shared dessert — was \$126 with an espresso, coffee and hot tea.

Perhaps as time goes on, management at the hotel will add some flowers, some plants, some color, some soft warmth to the building to match the open-hearted goodness of the food.

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