

Saint Martha "Cooks"

TAPAS

by Michele Lea May

Tapas are such a big part of the culture that there is a verb "tapear", which means "to eat tapas".

If you are invited to "go for tapas", you will be visiting lots of bars and taking a single tapas in each. Though from Spain tapas have become popular around the world, New Mexicans have been slow to adopt them. Now, you can find a handful of restaurants/bars that serve tapas proudly and deliciously.

Today In North America tapas are defined as anything edible as long as it is small and served with a drink: ham and cheese on toast, olives, small pieces of meat with sauce, Etc.

TAPAS? A 'lid' or 'cover'. In the early days of tapas, a slice of cheese or ham was placed over a drink - to keep out the flies, to hide the smell of bad wine or to keep the wind from blowing the drink everywhere. Lore states that a Spanish king was ill and could not drink alcohol without taking food with it; he took it seriously enough to issue a royal decree that insisted everyone take food with drink.

In Spain tapas are small individual bites of food, served in shot glasses or soup spoons.

As New Mexicans have adopted tapas, we have created our own style of enjoying them. First, there is no law that dictates you must have a cocktail and second you won't stop with one bite. You can look at tapas a couple of ways. Think of them as appetizers that make a meal, but with many more gourmet morsels than we ordinarily have as appetizers - not the same old fried zucchini, egg rolls or oysters on the half shell.

Another option for enjoying tapas is to sit back and leisurely watch Sunday afternoon or Monday night football, order a dish, have a drink, order another dish and spend the day sharing with your guests.

In Taos' El Meze (owners since January 2008 Annette Kratka, general manager and wine connoisseur and Fred Muller, chef & food historian) serve the "appetizer as a meal idea", the ambiance and elegant decor adding to the "Moonish Experience".

Though El Meze serves traditional "large plates" (Pan Seared Fresh Halibut, Grilled Double Cut Lamb Chops served with cracked black pepper and

lavender with vegetable jus and garlic chips for example) for our purpose we recommend trying what they call "small plates" - tapas. We started with "Fried Green Olives" stuffed with bleu cheese, served in a traditional martini glass accompanied by a watermelon & feta salad with preserved lemon and pomegranate syrup. Our next choice was Jamon Serrano - Spanish cured ham with seasonal fruit (though the fruit changes, we were lucky to have it served with peaches picked fresh in Taos), Sopa Verde - fresh mussels in a rich herb broth served with grilled flat bread, Grilled Asparagus wrapped in Jamon Serrano, Manchego cheese topped with white truffle oil and the local favorite, flash fried Calamari" with Spanish paprika, garlic and a splash of vinegar. There are many more options to choose from and it wasn't an easy task deciding. Each plate ranges from \$8 - \$12 and could easily feed four people. El Meze also specializes in Spanish wines hand picked by Annette and features other unique beverages such as a Pomegranate Cocktail-pomegranate juice, blood orange juice, lemonade and club soda. For dessert we ended the evening with a heavenly lavender creme brulee. Though the menu included lemon mousse, raspberry napoleons and several other mouth watering delights - all homemade with the expertise of Annette. It was so fabulous!

I would go so far as to say, it's worth a trip to Taos just to eat at this one of a kind restaurant!

To read more take a look at El Meze's profile on page 73. 575-751-3337. elmeze.com

After a fabulous meal at El Meze, amble next door to the Kore Gallery. Located in the historic El Torreón Hacienda, 1017 Paseo del Pueblo Norte. William Bailly, Kore Gallery proprietor says, "Like the uniqueness of the El Meze menu, the concept of the gallery provides new and refreshing art to the community." Bill delights in discussing his artists, their unique stories, art and unusual techniques. 575-758-2482 or taoskore.com

Less than half a mile down the road from El Meze and Kore Gallery is another "appetizers as a meal restaurant", Gutiz. Though Gutiz offers a much more casual setting, serving just breakfast and lunch, chef and owner Eduardo Gutiz combines traditional flavors using organic greens, fresh meats and fish. We had sesame chicken bites with chipotle sauce, ravioli with caramelized onion and a four cheese tomato bread (bleu, brie, provolone, mozzarella and olive oil). The tapas were delicious and it's worth a stop on your journey.

In Albuquerque, Gecko's - with two locations, @ 3500 Central SE, 262-1848 and 5801 Academy Rd. NE, 821-8291 - is a "stay a while, relax and try many combinations" type restaurant. Though owner Wally Minoli characterizes Gecko's as a neighborhood bar, the Academy location is so much more. They don't serve pitchers or low end domestics on tap. No T-shirt giveaways or unbearable sound blaring from the big screen tv's. In our opinion the "tapas" stole the show.

We started with a Habanero Lobster and Gulf Shrimp Ceviche. Plated with lightly fried pita triangles, this tapas looked like a beautiful bouquet. Todd Lovell, head chef, prefers warm-water Nicaraguan lobster tail and



shrimp from the gulf coast combined with Spanish olives, habanero chiles, tomatoes and green onions. All ingredients are bathed in the lime, lemon and rice vinegar sauce that is too good to leave at the bottom of the dish. Todd recommended we sip the juice after the ceviche was gone. We did and found it was like having a fancy Bloody Mary.

Next we had snails in lemon butter with bleu cheese: Todd described this dish playfully, saying, "The snails are really just the vessel to hold the buttery mixture they're cooked in." We agree, but we are so glad the snails were meaty and delicious. Escargot is difficult to find in New Mexico and when a diner does find it, one can only hope it's done as well as the dish at Gecko's. The snails are cooked in roasted garlic with bleu cheese and butter mixture poured over all for a rich, inviting taste. Most people stop at the butter and garlic when having snails, but the bleu cheese definitely added to the boldness. This dish was more in the Spanish tradition. Served with toasted bread, we found ourselves soaking up the sauce after we had polished off the snails.

While still savoring the cerviche, we were served the tempura fried Maryland soft-shell crab. The crab gets top billing in this dish, but we found ourselves enamored with the lovely green salad that framed it. The salad had deep, rich greens, smoked bacon bits in a spicy papaya vinaigrette. It was refreshing to the taste buds and we found ourselves talking about the salad more than the crab. While the salad stole the show, the Maryland soft-shell crab was very tasty. It was lightly fried in a tempura batter and soft enough to cut with a fork.

Our next selection was grilled "Peel & Eat" half "Choke". Artichoke dipped in butter isn't new, but certainly,

When the Gecko's chef, Todd Lovell worked his magic, there was something creatively different about it.

Not only does he steam the "choke," as he calls it, but he grills it for about 30 seconds. This Grilling gives it a smoky flavor for a unique taste. When the "choke" is peeled and dunked in his lemon/feta sauce. It was hard to peel just one or

two leaves. We ate it right down to the plate.

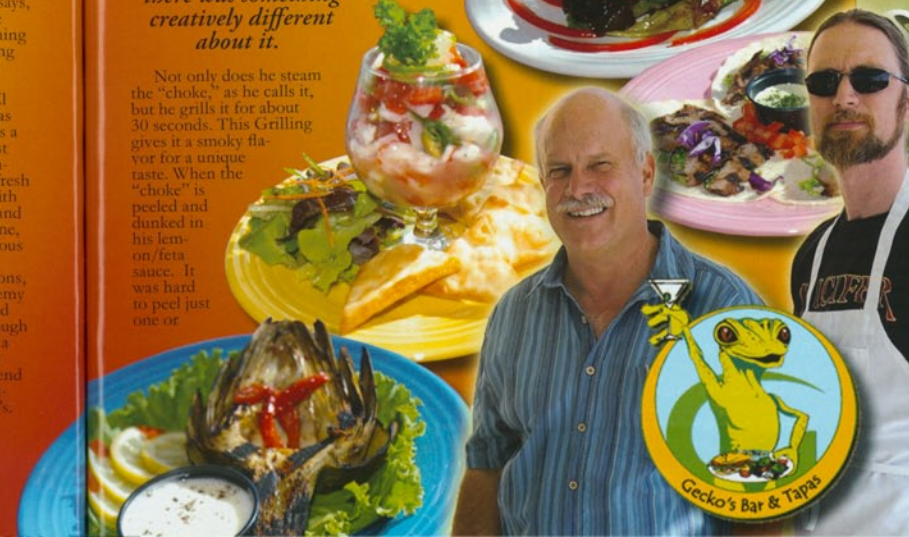
Finally, the house favorite red mole grilled sirloin taco with roasted poblanillo chile crema was placed on the table. The thinly sliced steak sat atop a white corn tortilla and a tasty pico de gallo dressing. It was nice to enjoy the taste of every fresh individual ingredient without having to fight through cheese and salsa.

Gecko's owner, Wally Minoli says they've done more than 100 different tapas since they opened and keep about ten different ones on the menu at any given time.

Some, like the steak tacos, are mainstays, while the others come and go - some seasonally and some just because the chef has created a new one he wants to share with the patrons.

Although Gecko's specialty is tapas, they have other options on the menu such as the CR's Crawdaddy Cake Sammiech, Tarragon Breaded Eggplant and of course, the New Mexican staple "Green Chile Choesburger".

They're open 7 days a week. geckobar.com.



G E C K O ' S

"Something New & Different"

by Ann Powers

"I left for seven years and said I'd never cook again."

– Chef Frederick Muller.

Liar.

And, God bless him for his dishonesty (intended or not), otherwise the Taos area would never have the pleasure of experiencing Fred's new place – El Meze restaurant in the magnificently restored 1847 El Torreon Hacienda at 1017 Paseo del Pueblo Norte in El Prado, one mile north of the Taos Plaza on the mountain side.

"It's unique," says Fred. "We're exploring new ground that is actually old ground."

Not a lie. The cuisine is a modern interpretation of old world Spain inspired with North African and Arabic influences. While researching his 1995 book, *La Comida: The Foods, Cooking and Traditions of The Upper Rio Grande*, Fred discovered significant North African influences in Northern New Mexican culture. The Moors (North Africans) occupied Spain for 800 years imbedding traditions, flavors and styles within the Spanish culture that followed them into the New World. Northern New Mexico retained many of the cultural traditions and recipes of Moorish Spain. Hence, the menu and vision at El Meze – meaning 'The Table' in Arabic.

"We're stellar and consistent every night," adds Owner, General Manager Annette Kratka, who also serves as a menu and wine list tour guide for patrons, spending quality time at each table ensuring guests an incredible fine dining experience. "Everything has a little twist."

Well said. The results are bright, perky flavors that never overwhelm each other and certainly wake up the mouth satisfying the most sophisticated and well-traveled palette.

Savory Sopa Verde with fresh mussels in a rich herb broth served with grilled flat bread inspires one to linger over every spoonful. Gazpacho topped with blood orange granite sparkles with each tantalizing taste. Watermelon & Feta Salad with preserved lemon and pomegranate syrup creates a surprising and harmonious compilation. Grilled Double-Cut Lamb Chops with cracked black pepper, lavender and fried garlic chips prove to be both intensely rich and wonderfully fragrant.

Another inspiration for Fred's new venue and menu was a desire to do something new and different, backed by his 30 years of culinary experience. Fred trained in classical

French cuisine in Switzerland and worked with Mark Miller, Jeremiah Tower and Joyce Goldstein in San Francisco during the 1980s.

"When things were really POP-PING!" exclaims Fred.

Next, he returned to his southern roots in North Carolina, studying the South's cooking traditions at Bill Neal's Crook's Corner in Chapel Hill. Fred brings that experience to El Meze's menu as evident in the menu's Mess o' Greens - sautéed with garlic and onion, topped with a poached egg.

While Fred champions the kitchen, Annette reigns over the dessert and wine list. Her knowledge of grapes stems from her own roots.

"My sister owns two vineyards in Healdsburg, California and my whole family is a bunch of frickin' foodies," she says.

The wine list is predominantly Spanish. Annette recently added two Argentinian wines made with Spanish grapes.

For dessert, Lavender Crème Brulee or Lemon Mousse and Raspberry Napoléons with pistachio, cardamom and coriander filo leaves perfectly complete a unique and exciting dining adventure. There's also a Chocolate Truffle Soufflé, Fresh Fruit Crostata and Mini Cardamom Doughnuts. Everything is complimented with impeccable and charming service. Our waiter, Ian, served each course with keen knowledge and such precise timing, it was almost creepy – but in a good way.

El Meze features two inviting and intimate dining rooms, enhanced with art by Pierre Delattre, Thom Wheeler and Bill Rane. There's outdoor seating with a spectacular view of Taos Mountain. Plans on adding a wine and tapas bar, flamenco dancing and... a burning car out front?? Annette rolls her eyes and shakes her head. "I need a reason why on that one Fred. Taos already knows you're out there."

"We're not a typical Taos restaurant," counters Fred.

El Meze seats about 100 inside and out. Catering available.

Reservations recommended.
575.751.3337

EXPERIENCE THE EXCITING MODERN INTERPRETATION OF MOORISH SPAIN FROM CHEF AND FOOD HISTORIAN FRED MULLER

FEATURING
SMALL PLATES "TAPAS"
LARGE PLATES AND
SPANISH WINES

El Meze RESTAURANT

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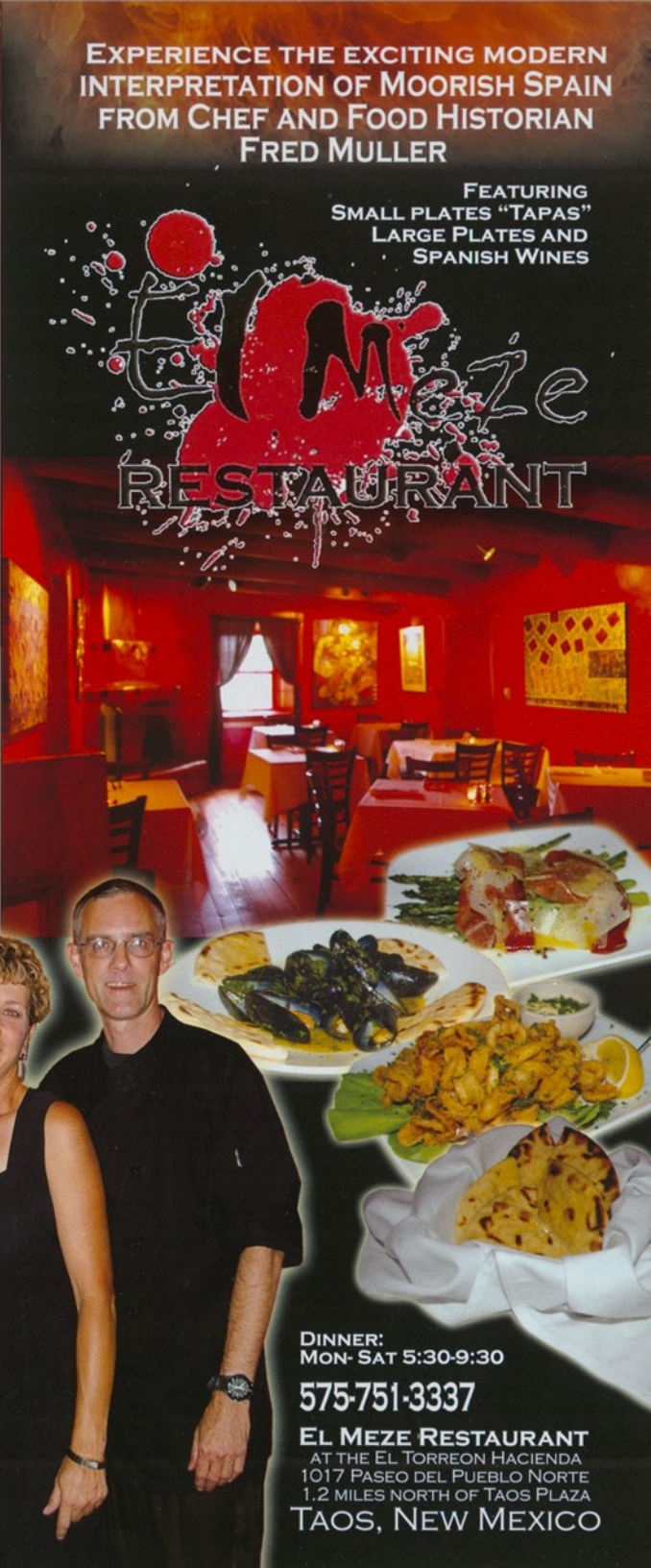
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DINNER:
MON- SAT 5:30-9:30

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1017 PASEO DEL PUEBLO NORTE
1.2 MILES NORTH OF TAOS PLAZA
TAOS, NEW MEXICO