



NIKESHA BREEZE, COURTESY EL MEZE



big restaurant, little hamlet

El Meze's flavors shine in El Prado

A fork-tender dry-aged rib-eye steak, served with thyme-and-lavender-scented frites, wins my steak-of-the-year award.

Tucked in the tiny Northern New Mexico hamlet of El Prado is a delightfully sophisticated restaurant with an unusual and delicious menu. El Meze Restaurant brings tapas from Moorish Spain and exotic spices and flavors from North Africa to this cozy setting on the north side of Taos. As the ski season heats up, so do Chef Frederick Muller's eclectic specialties. Brightly painted and art-bedecked walls form a colorful gallery-esque setting for a menu full of dishes equally as vibrant. Muller has transformed two fairly small, tidy rooms in the historic El Torreon Hacienda into a stylish, casual atmosphere, where small and large plates brimming with familiar and foreign ingredients are given a creative spin.

During Chef Muller's research while writing *La Comida: The Foods, Cooking and Traditions of the Upper Rio Grande*, he discovered a great deal of North African influence in Northern New Mexican culture. Words like *adobe* and *acequia*, for instance, are both Arabic in origin. The Moors, having occupied Spain for 800 years, lent the Spanish a sense of style, architecture, and cuisine, which they later brought to the New World. El Meze means "the table" in Arabic. And what a table of goodies it is.

On the tapas list, jamón serrano is shaved thin and strewn over sweet white nectarines, given a salty kick with Manchego cheese. Plump green olives are stuffed with Spanish Cabrales blue cheese, lightly breaded, and crisp-fried, served in an elegant martini glass—each olive is so scrumptious, you hardly miss the gin or vodka. Tender buffalo short ribs get a Norteño treatment, braised in a chile-rich adobado sauce. Spicy kefta lamb sausages get cooled down with a cucumber yogurt sauce, a classic Mediterranean pairing.

Main courses include a fork-tender dry-aged rib-eye steak that was so flavorful, given its 21-day aging, it didn't need the Moroccan butter accompaniment. Served with thyme-and-lavender-scented *frites*, it wins my steak-of-the-year award. Double-cut lamb chops were yummy and simple, crusted with cracked pepper and more fragrant lavender.

Fish lovers will adore the seared halibut with sweet potatoes, fennel, oranges, and Andouille sausage, while vegetarians should try the fideos pasta with mushrooms, asparagus, greens, and lots of garlic. The concise wine list has about a dozen carefully chosen bottles, each available by the glass. A NAIA 2006 was a crisp alternative to Sauvignon Blanc. The Juan Gil 2006 Jumilla from Spain was full-bodied and inky, perfect with the grilled meats.

If you are celebrating the end of a glorious day on the slopes or planning one for the future, don't miss the warm cardamom mini doughnuts, drizzled decadently with caramel-chocolate sauce, or the chocolate truffle soufflé, each a fitting finish or good fuel for more schussing and mogul-jumping to come. Even non-skiers like me will love them.—J

El Meze Restaurant at The Historic El Torreon Hacienda
1017 Paseo Del Pueblo Norte, El Prado, NM, 575-751-3337, elmeze.com