

EL MEZE

Nuevo Moorish

By Steve Fox

Fred Muller is one of many in the restaurant biz who've had to put their best-laid plans for expansion on hold. Back in March, Dining for Dollars reported, in a first look at Muller's new place, El Meze, that Fred had bought the Torreón Hacienda. He needed to have a room for a tapas bar, a gallery, space for performance art, and patio dining in nice weather.

Woulda been lovely. As it's turned out, the long-term trend of dwindling visitor traffic to Taos continued through 2008, and then, kabam! There went the national and international economies.

So the space intended for the tapas and wine bar is now occupied by the Bill Davis Photography Gallery (see P/Reviews, p. 16). Kore Gallery occupies the opposite wing on the north, which J Fine Art will soon fill with some of their contemporary art.

Fred and partner Annette Kratka continue to serve tasty Nuevo Moorish food in the back dining rooms, warmed by a fireplace and by the art on the walls. The pesky diners, Steve and Donna, dropped in last week to try some different dishes, nine months after we first ate at Fred's new place.

Donna ordered Pasta with Elotes, a Spanish term for green beans. Before it came, we each had a Little Green Salad, which was full leaves of butter lettuce with a sherry vinaigrette. A bit of garlic and mustard gave the dressing a pleasantly spicy aftertaste.

Donna's pasta was a light and zingy

bowl of sauce-less penne. It was tossed with the elotes, mint and fennel sprigs, crimini and shiitake mushrooms, and 1" x 3" paper-thin slices of Manchego cheese. That's a more tangy relative of Parmesan. Ranger Donna buzzed right through it happily, offering me tastes that I greatly enjoyed.

Never one to pass up any form of French fries, I ordered Herb Frites, dusted with thyme and lavender, with a roasted garlic aioli (like a mayo) for dipping. There were plenty of them in the container and they were good, but like all fries, should be eaten before they cool off. For my entrée I ordered

Kefta, grilled spicy ground lamb with cucumber yogurt and cilantro dipping sauces. Our server, Isaac Gonzales, was always quick with details, and described the Kefta as "a lamb popsicle on a stick." It was bigger than satay sticks or shish-kebab, measuring about 1x2x6", grilled to a light brown crust, and great with the cucumber sauce. For me, the other dipping sauce had too much garlic to taste the cilantro.

So our meal was a satisfying mix of crunchy and soft, salty and cool. We asked Annette, the dessert chef, about our choices. "Well, I had thought that the chocolate truffle was going to be my signature dessert"—which Donna and I shared the last time, and it was killer—"but no, now I think the Lemon Mousse Raspberry Napoleon is becoming my signature." She described it as filo dough, flaky and light, dusted with ground pistachio, layered with raspberry purée and sweet and savory crèmes flavored with cardamom and coriander. It's a rare day I turn down chocolate, but Annette was right: it was terrific, a great palate cleanser after our meal.

The tab came to \$66.

