

# PASADENA Weekly

12.03.15 | PASADENAWEEKLY.COM | GREATER PASADENA'S FREE NEWS AND ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY



**RESTAURANT REVIEW**

Potatoes and hot lava cheese



## A Real Find

EL METATE CAFÉ OFFERS GREAT FOOD AT THE RIGHT PRICE

BY ERICA WAYNE | PHOTOS BY DANNY LIAO

**El Metate Café**  
 12 N. Monty Ave., Pasadena  
 (626) 729-0706  
 elmetate-cafe.com  
 No Alcohol/Minor Cash

and an ornately framed mirror are hung somewhat randomly around the room.

Given its unpretentious appearance, you'd be justified in thinking that the menu would likely be the same old, same old. And it does cover the basics. But the list is extensive, and there are plenty of happy surprises. Just check out the asatrigón or appetizer, Nachos (\$4.99), taquitos (\$1.99) and flautas (\$1.99) are standards. But look a little closer: Buarachos (\$5.99), the saucer-shaped (flour the size) equivalent of Mexican pizzas, with a hefty base of masa supporting toppings of meat, beans and cheese, are not.

Gorditas (\$3) are also fairly hard to come by in the Tins-Mex restaurants that predominate in our neck of the woods. The word means "little fatty" and that's what it looks like, a thick fried and folded masa envelope stuffed to its virtual gills. Mitas (\$3), or "little mites," are similar to gorditas but even

CONTINUED ON PAGE 12

## RESTAURANT REVIEW

Chicken, melted cheese, and pulled pork tortilla



**A REAL FIND**  
 CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11

rater on Mexican restaurant menus. Thick masa tortillas are griddled, loaded with good stuff and topped with a second tortilla, kind of like a wrap (which El Metate also serves for the same price) with a hat.

In a pushover for anything that starts out with a masa platform, we decided to try one each of the El Metate's buarachos, gorditas and mitas, specifying caribao as the meat for the first, pollo for the second and carne asada for the third. We also ordered a cheese enchilada riga (\$3), chile relleno (\$3) and pork tamales (\$3).

While we waited, we snatched hot crispy chips with pico de gallo and sampled homemade salsa from the small bar at the counter. These consisted of a mild salsa verde, spicy pomegranate red chile, spicier molcajete (roasted tomato and green chile) and a killer chipotle. Every one a winner! And we sipped cups of El Metate's most but refreshing homemade horchata agua fresca (\$2.50), noting that if we wanted a healthier beverage, the restaurant also juices celery, carrots, beets, oranges or combinations thereof (\$2.50/\$3.50).

When our buarache arrived, it was a thing of beauty, piled with meat (the pork flunky dice), frigoles and red sauce, crowned with a generous array of dark green romaine mixed with chopped tomatoes and onion, a snowfall of grated Cotija cheese and decorative drizzles of sour cream. A big scoop of chunky guacamole loaded with onion, cilantro and tomato accompanied it.

The gorditas and mitas were similarly decorated, each with showers of rich green, tomatoes and grated cheese (possibly anadito or Mexican mozzarella). And, in each, the meat enveloped by the heavy masa wrapping, like the pork in the buarache, was finely diced. The chicken was good, but the smoky char-grilled flavor of the beef was outstanding.

Our tamales, the last of the masa masterpieces we tried, lounged on the banana leaf in which it had been steamed, doosed half with green and half with red sauce. I couldn't decide which I preferred. The masa was tender, almost fluffy and not at all gummy; the pork was succulent.

Nonchalantly the light egg batter on our chile relleno,

a plump Anaheim with a slight kick, passed our "food" test, nearly melting in our mouths. The chile floated in a mild red sauce with more than enough melted cheese blanketing it. Like the tamales, this dish was garished with romaine and grated carrot.

The single element that riled our enchilada was above the norm: was its wrapper, so tender and thin that it was more crisp than tortilla. Its unusual texture made us wonder if the restaurant's name might actually signify that El Metate's owners grind their own grain. I didn't get the chance to ask, but I might next time I visit.

I was struck with same thought when we dived up a shrimp burrito with chipotle cream sauce (\$10.99) we carried out for dinner the next evening and found its wrapping as light as the enchilada's. The shrimp were finely diced like all the other meats we'd had at the restaurant, bathed in rich, spicy gravy that was irresistible. One burrito easily satisfied our hunger but left us wanting more.

There are enough treasures to try at El Metate to keep us and anybody else looking for something out of the ordinary coming back over and over. For instance, the menu has a whole section called Carnes al Molcajete. This doesn't refer to molcajete salsa but rather to the stone bowl in which the sauce (and other items such as guacamole) are mixed.

These bowls can also be used to prepare and cook stews. El Metate's include among others, pollo chipotle (\$8.99), carne a la tangapanola (\$3.99), lengua (tongue) en salsa verde (\$6.99) and a mélange of shrimp, scallops, chorizo, chicharrón, carne molida and cheese (\$11.99). Now that our daytime temperatures have finally gotten under 90 degrees, these all sound pretty tempting.

I should mention that El Metate's, which closes at 8 p.m. Monday through Thursday and 3 p.m. on Friday and Saturday, doesn't have a liquor license, so those who enjoy alcohol with dinner might prefer a break/after or brunchtime visit. (They open at 9 a.m. on weekdays, 10 a.m. on Saturdays.) Frankly, a meal without alcohol is a perfect prelude to a performance at Boston Court or in a show at the law House, where a two-drink minimum purchase is required. But whenever you go to El Metate's I guarantee you'll be impressed. ■