

Pasadena Star-News

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Friday, May 27, 2016

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RESTAURANT REVIEW

Traditional Mexican favorites at El Metate Café

By Merrill Shindler

If you go to the website for the lovely, lively, delicious El Metate Café and click on the "About Us" tab, you'll find out who runs El Metate: "Mom, Dad, and two sons. Notice that Mom ALWAYS comes first. As a family our day starts about 7 a.m. and usually ends at about 10 p.m. Wow — 15 hours!"

Sweet, and so true. Look in the kitchen — how could you not, since it's behind the front counter? — and there's mom, taking the orders and checking the food. Sit down, and if those aren't the sons bringing the food to you, they're friends of the sons. We often speak of a place being family-run, but often it's just metaphorical. Here, it's real. Everyone is sweet and patient and concerned. This is what restaurants are supposed to be, and so rarely are. This is one from the heart.

A metate is an ancient stone kitchen implement for grinding grain; there's a drawing of one on the cover of the menu with a woman in huaraches using

R. Through the menu here is, "The Richest Mexican Food in Town," it could just as easily be "The Most Traditional Mexican Food..." For this is where you go for the dishes that so many of us grew up eating — the oversized burritos, the tostadas and enchiladas, the factas and taquitos, the "tricos," etc.

The place is so genuine that on the menu the dishes are listed (and described) in Spanish first and then English. You could easily drop El Metate in the middle of Guadalajara, and no adjustment would be needed at all. Even the aguas and the jugos are right out of the classic playbook. And the agua de sandía — watermelon juice — may be the most refreshing drink in the world.

Show up for breakfast, and you can order the huevos rancheros, huevos con chorizo and huevos con jamon, all served with rice and beans, for a modest \$5.99 each. Eggs with nachacha — shredded beef — run a buck more. As do the world-class chilaquiles, a much loved dish of scrambled eggs with taco



A colorful taco salad is on the menu at El Metate Café in Pasadena.

chips, served with green or red sauce. These are dishes that will keep you till lunch — or beyond.

If it's not breakfast time — figuring out what to eat is a problem, for there's an abundance of tasty possibilities. There are nine burritos, all of which are more than you'll think can be

consumed, until you manage to eat the whole thing — and wonder how you did that. There are lots of tacos, priced variously at \$1.50, \$2 and \$2.50, or in a combo with rice and beans, salad and sauces for \$5.99. (You can also serve yourself salsa from a counter at the front

of the restaurant, where you're encouraged not to be wasteful.) For those with a serious hunger to satisfy, there are plates with beef and chicken and tongue and shrimp and fish and many small dishes, as in Murro's Appetizer Plate, which gives you nachos, frioles, flautas, taquitos, quesadillas, guacamole and sour cream. Plus chips and salsa, of course. A lot to eat for \$9.99. And if you feel like some spice and citrus and seafood, the seafood cocktails are the way to go — various combinations of shrimp and fish and octopus and abalone.

There are big bowls of soup as well, mostly seafood, but also chicken and beef and meatballs — and the classic hangover cure of potole and menudo, served on Saturdays. (The menu says "Saturday and Sunday" — but the place isn't open Sunday. Wishful thinking, I guess.) And if you need dessert, there are strawberries with cream, along with a popular fruit

and granola and yogurt dessert called a biruzco. It's very popular in Guadalajara. Like I said — the place



EL METATE CAFÉ

Rating: ★★

Address: 12 N. Mentor Ave. Pasadena

Information: 620-228-0706, www.elmetate-cafe.com

Cuisine: Mexican

When: Breakfast, lunch and dinner, Monday through Saturday

Details: Soft drinks, no reservations

Prices: About \$12 per person

Cards: MC, V

It would fit perfectly. Though it fits on Mentor Avenue just as well.

Merrill Shindler is a Los Angeles-based freelance dining critic. Send him email at mrst@iast.com.