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La Esperanza offers tasty Mexican fare

Back in Susana Cordova's native city of Puebla, Mexico, mole is taken very seriously. The dark, thick, almost sweet blend of chocolate, cinnamon, plantains, almonds, raisins, roasted sesame seeds, and Mexican chili peppers, is believed to have originated in a convent there.

In many villages, there is one special cook hired to make the mole for baptisms and weddings.

More than 40 years ago, Cordova learned the fine art of making mole from the cook who made it for her family's special parties.

And she uses that same daylong process to create the mole that is spooned over enchiladas and chicken at her family's restaurant, La Esperanza, in Lindenwold.

"My mother is the only one who can make it," said Saul Cordova, 24, the youngest of five children, all of whom help at the restaurant, except the one sister still in Mexico. Even his sisters cannot make it like his mother, he said.

The process calls for vegetables and other ingredients to be slow-simmered in oil. The dried pasilla, mulata and ancho - Mexican peppers - must be hand-ground to a fine consistency before they are added to the sauce and simmered again for several hours.

The end result is a thick, almost black sauce, a dance of sweet and fire. The taste doesn't burn your tongue with its spice, but rather coats it with a smoky resonance of cinnamon, chocolate, plantain and spice.

One of the house specialties is the mole ladled over the most tender chicken, sprinkled with roasted sesame seeds. It is served with tortillas on the side to swab up the mole, which is so good you hate to leave it on the plate.

Although one of the best-sellers, the chicken mole is but one of many dishes worth noting on the menu at this charming converted-house cafe, adorned with brightly colored striped blankets, pottery, paintings and religious artifacts from Mexico.

For starters, the guacamole is outstanding, made fresh and served in a piece of earthen Mexican pottery. The traditional mortar and pestle is used to mash the avocado, cilantro, garlic and jalapenos, before the addition of fresh lime juice, salt, and diced tomatoes and onion.

The quesadilla appetizer was nearly enough for an entree: a folded-over tortilla, filled with chicken or beans, and cheese, then sliced into wedges and served with sliced avocado, lettuce and a dollop of sour cream.

The family's rendition of ceviche also was well done. Served in a parfait dish, it was a bright and lively mix of shrimp marinated in fresh lime juice with a dash of vinegar, along with avocado chunks, diced tomatoes,

onions and cilantro. The ingredients soak up the zing of the lime juice for a tart and terrific version of this popular Mexican dish.

The chiles rellenos, or roasted poblano peppers filled with cheese and finished with tomato sauce, also were memorable, as were the chicken tacos, with the chicken marinated in chipotle and served with fresh cilantro and a lime wedge.

The tongue tacos, made from the tongue of a cow, are another popular dish, drawing fans just for them. The meat is tender, flavorful and juicy, and the tacos are served with a verde salsa with just enough kick.

The only disappointments were the sopas and the beef fajitas. The sopas, or freshly made tortillas, were thick, crusty, hard and dried out. Even the refried beans, cheese, lettuce, tomato and sour cream couldn't redeem them. As for the fajitas, the beef was tough and chewy.

Although the family members are accommodating, the service can be mixed. During the day, the service was attentive, while at night, on a not particularly busy night, we waited long after our meals were done - with our empty plates sitting in front of us - to be offered dessert.

But we were certainly glad we didn't miss out on those treats. The flan was a terrific rendition of the traditional Spanish baked custard, firm and layered with a touch of caramel. The tres leche cake also was worth mention, a moist and rich old-fashioned cake finished with condensed, evaporated and regular milk. And no one should go through life without trying a mango milkshake.

Open for one year, the restaurant attracts many patrons of Mexican descent, who buy the Mexican baseball caps, CDs and T-shirts the family sells. But more than half of the customers are not Mexicans, drawn only to the authentic fare.

La Esperanza translated means hope. According to the family, the name was chosen to represent their hope.

The sons chose a little house as their logo, without realizing how much it resembles the first house the family owned on the side of a mountain in Puebla.

It is in that house where their hope began, Cordova said. It is the same hope that led them to their first family venture in another little house converted to a restaurant in Lindenwold, and the same hope that continues to push them each day.

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