

Taste Test: La Hacienda & El Chorro Lodge

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The past few years have held many ups and downs for the Valley dining world. we've seen the opening of some of the state's most stellar restaurants—but we've also experienced the heartbreaking loss of many beloved eateries, sometimes in throngs. Tthis is the story of two longtime favorites that rose from the gourmet graveyard and are once again planting roots in the local dining scene.



La Hacienda

Though Fairmont Scottsdale certainly wasn't hurting for a delicious, upscale dining spot (it's home to Bourbon Steak and The Grill), many Valley dwellers were devastated when La Hacienda closed up shop in 2008. Early this year, La Hacienda re-opened its doors and welcomed a more modern look, a cool tequila bar that displays 110 selections and a whole new menu.

Famed chef Richard Sandoval is now at the helm alongside the talented Executive Chef Forest Hamrick, who worked at La Hacienda during its AAA Four-Diamond heyday. Together, they dish out some of the Valley's top Modern Mexican fare. For starters, the queso fundido with melted Oaxaca, Chihuahua and gouda cheeses (get it with mushrooms and chorizo) should commence every Mexican meal. The tamal de huitlacoche and empanadas de camaron were also incredibly delicious, with the tamale being more savory and rich and the shrimp turnovers being more sweet and light.

Seafoodies will love the huachinango a la veracruzana or the pistachio, chili and ancho-crusted tuna as their main dish.

The dishes' sides had their ups and downs: the red snapper featured a yummy smoked bacon fufu, while the tuna plate's green apple salad was a bit bitter. The best dish, though, was the filet a la parilla. The beef tenderloin was impeccably flavored with brown sugar and coriander and paired with yummy Oaxaca cheese enchiladas. All together, the filet a la parilla is now one of our favorite steak dishes in the Valley.

The La Hacienda love keeps on growing right through dessert. Our three favorite after-dinner delights were the bomba de chocolate, the flan de coco and the cinnamon churros. The first plate featured an incredible anise, banana and chocolate mousse—a unique treat for any chocolate lover. The coconut flan, topped with mango, made for a divine summery treat. (Plus, the mini coconut that crowned the flan was just too-cute.) But our favorite, the cinnamon churros, truly ended our evening with a bang. The warm churros were paired with three devilishly good dipping sauces: cajeta, chili-chocolate fondue and cream cheese natilla. The cajeta (which is a caramel sauce made from goat's milk) and the natilla were sweet and creamy while the fondue offered a spicy kick. Sticky buns and churros, eggs Benedict and queso fundido—what great ways to say “welcome back.”

La Hacienda Fairmont Scottsdale, 7575 E. Princess Dr., Scottsdale. 480.585.4848, www.fairmont.com/scottsdale.

El Chorro Lodge

May 2009 dealt a huge blow to those who loved the Paradise Valley landmark, El Chorro Lodge. After being built in 1934 as the Judson School for Girls and then serving as one of the most beloved Valley restaurants for many, many years after that, the restaurant closed its doors last year. In February, El Chorro Lodge reopened, under new owner Jacquie Dorrance, with a fresh look, courtesy of Vallone Design, and a fresh menu that features a mix of old and new from Chef Charles Kassels.

Before they even get to the menu, longtime El Chorro fans will notice a few changes at the iconic dining spot. The outdoor dining space has nearly tripled in size, and now features a bocce ball court and an organic garden. Plus, eco-friendly aspects can be found throughout the property. However, time-honored favorites like the Classroom Bar and many of the original furnishings are still in place.

Also still in place are the finger-licking (literally) sticky buns—some crisped around the edges, others ooey gooey. (This is El Chorro's version of a bread basket.) After making our way through a basket of buns, we gobbled up a trio of delicious lunchtime starters: the heirloom garden beet salad, the tomato and burrata salad, and the jumbo shrimp cocktail. The beet salad was a favorite, featuring a rainbow of gold and crimson beets sandwiched with goat cheese. The perfect complement to this was the blissful Bloody Mary which was topped with enough veggies and shrimp to be an appetizer itself.

Next up, the eggs Benedict is not to be missed. El Chorro's hollandaise sauce was divine, and we suggest pairing it with the smoked salmon, which finds a very happy home alongside the Canadian bacon, tomato and hashbrowns. The turkey Reuben, rounded out with sauerkraut and Swiss cheese, is another midday favorite—and we could taste why. The sandwich's sweet Russian dressing was addictive.

Though we don't need to convince you to linger a bit longer on El Chorro's patio, definitely order the sticky bun bread pudding. The dessert was as tasty as the pre-meal sticky buns but made even better with ice cream and Woodford Reserve bourbon sauce.

El Chorro Lodge 5550 E. Lincoln Dr., Paradise Valley. 480.948.5170, www.elchorrolodge.com.