



El Chico serves innovative twists on traditional favorites

Friday, March 13, 2009

I recently visited El Chico in Johnson City with a friend for a Mexican meal, which from start to finish provided me with some interesting new dining experiences.

As is customary with most Mexican eateries, guests at El Chico receive a bowl of salsa and a basket of chips as soon as they are seated. In addition, El Chico's servers also provide diners with some fresh-baked sopapillas and butter to enjoy while looking over the menu.

While the complimentary chips, salsa and sopapillas provide a nice start to the meal, diners might also want to share one of the menu's tempting appetizers. Options include Fiesta Layer Dip, Taquitos or a Top Shelf Botanas Platter, which includes beef nachos, taquitos, chicken quesadillas, stuffed jalapenos, a mini chicken chimichanga and chili con queso.

My dining companion and I decided to share an order of the Fiesta Layer Dip. This hearty favorite, offered in small or large sizes, contains layers of beans, chili con queso, spicy beef and chili con carne, topped with tomatoes, cheddar cheese, sour cream and jalapenos. We ordered the small and found it more than enough to enjoy with some toasted tortilla chips.

According to information from the restaurant's Web site, the El Chico chain dates back to 1926, when Adelaida Cuellar sold her homemade tamales at a county fair near Dallas, Texas. The popularity of her cooking led to the establishment of a small cafe. Then, in 1940, five of her sons opened the first El Chico restaurant in Dallas.

Today, there are close to a hundred El Chico restaurants in Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana and throughout the Southeastern United States. Twenty-seven El Chico Restaurants are owned and operated by franchisees. Six El Chico restaurants are located in Tennessee.

The Johnson City restaurant offers a casual, pleasant dining environment. The dining area is designed around an arched courtyard. The walls are antique gold accented by teal blue and terra cotta trim. Ornamental tiles, pottery, framed Mexican posters and colorful sombreros complete the fun decor. Festive Mexican music and a high-definition plasma television located near the bar area also add to the overall atmosphere.

While relaxing in these inviting surroundings, we perused the menu. El Chico offers several traditional meals and classic combination platters as well as an American section, which offers Grilled Chicken Breast, Cheeseburger and Country Fried Steak.

Several of the Mexican entrees tempted me, including Cascabel Ribeye, Chicken Monterrey Dinner and Chicken and Mushroom Fajitas. I eventually ordered the Shrimp Enchiladas while my dinner companion chose the Top Shelf Cascabel Chicken & Spinach Quesadillas. My friend also considered such entrees as Brisket Tacos and Tex-Mex Burrito before reaching a decision.

The Shrimp Enchiladas featured tender shrimp, jack cheese and spinach wrapped in tortillas and topped with more shrimp and verde sauce. This new addition to the El Chico menu is accompanied by Diablo Corn and Frijoles Rancheros. I really liked the verde sauce, which gave this dish a tart kick.

My friend's Top Shelf Cascabel Chicken & Spinach Quesadillas featured a grilled sundried tomato flour tortilla filled with spicy Cascabel chicken, spinach, cheese and mushrooms. This dish is served with sour cream and pico de gallo.

Both of these main dishes were pleasing to the palate. I enjoyed the Frijoles Rancheros, a bowl of pinto beans seasoned with diced onions, peppers and tomatoes. The Diablo Corn wasn't quite as exciting, but provided a mild counterpoint to such a zesty main dish.

Throughout the meal, we also enjoyed good service from an attentive and personable server. When time came for dessert, he also helped by describing the various choices.

Dessert options for concluding a meal at El Chico include Chocolate Cake, Mexican Apple Pie, Brownie Skillet Sundae, Flan and Fried Ice Cream. I chose to try the Mexican Apple Pie.

The concluding touches for this dessert were added at the table by our server, who poured a warm Mexican brandy butter sauce over the generous helping of apple pie and an ample scoop of cinnamon ice cream.

The flavors -- sweet apples, pungent cinnamon and the delectable brandy butter sauce -- merged in a delightful combination that created a unique slant on this classic dessert and gave the meal a sensational finale.

For innovative variations on traditional Mexican and American favorites, I recommend a visit to El Chico.

AT A GLANCE: El Chico, 2929 Roan St., Johnson City. 282-4080. Open daily from 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Entrees range from \$7.59-\$17.99. Credit cards accepted. Carryout available. Full service bar available.