

## MEXICAN

## The Real Enchilada

Had I any inkling of the real thing, those years of waiting would have brought on despair. But our appetites never faltered, even when presented with salsa-from-a-jar, Velveeta tacos with tomato sauce and electric-colored margaritas. There are a few restaurants a cut above the rest—Cinco de Mayo and Santa Fe, for instance—but two, Zarela and Rosa Mexicano, deserve the credit for introducing New Yorkers to the subtleties of cinnamon and cloves, of fifty distinct chile flavors, of flours made from seeds (pumpkin and sesame) in Mexican cooking.

The atmosphere at these places matches the food—no hordes downing margaritas and checking one another out. Serious eating is the goal. Rosa Mexicano is the tried and true, and true it remains. Chef Josephine Howard's trademark mixed-at-the-table guacamole is only the start; she transforms the simplest of ingredients into sophisticated dishes. Shrimp, cornmeal and chile paste become a superb shrimp bisque, and corn dumplings in a chicken-and-tomato broth betters the best corn-dumpling soup I'd had up till then, discovered in a Cuernavacan hole-in-the-wall. No combination plates here—instead, extraordinary stews and casseroles, with cornmeal and chicken mole,

or pork and chicken and hominy. And to finish, Josephine whips up the lightest flan anywhere.

Zarela—a bit more crowded, a bit less adobe in the decor—has, if possible, better food. The emphasis here, says Zarela Martinez, is “on hots and colds, raw and cooked, side by side, with several very distinct sauces accompanying most dishes.” Start with the snapper hash, cooked with tomato, scallions and jalapeños; in fact, stick with the seafood throughout—hot shrimp with coconut, or seared tuna in a traditional mole sauce. And then there are all those asides—fried cauliflower glazed in a salsa sauce, rice baked with sour cream. The only problem is knowing when to stop.

If all this haute Mexican cuisine seems daunting, head off the beaten track. Ilusiones may not be in the same class as Zarela or Rosa Mexicano, but it may be the best “neighborhood” restaurant around, the neighborhood being Long Island City. Even Mexicans frequent the place, often in large groups, often to hear the roving mariachis. It's just plain comfortable here. Tasty, too. There's Mexican fondue or cactus salad, a mild affair. Fajitas are the house specialties. Finish with natilla, a coconut brandy flan. By then a crooner is singing Julio Iglesias. Chances are you're grinning and your shoes are off.

**THE BASICS:** Rosa Mexicano, 1063 First Avenue; 753-7407. Dinner for two with drinks, about \$80. Zarela, 953 Second Avenue; 644-6740. Dinner for two with drinks, about \$60. Ilusiones, 40-01 Northern Boulevard, L.I.C.; 718-729-3301. Take the R train to 36th Street/Northern Boulevard. Dinner for two with drinks, about \$50. Reservations recommended at all three. ELIZABETH HANLY

