
Posted on Fri, Mar. 10, 2006

Mexican fusion in a cozy Blue Bell spot

El Sarape Authentic Mexican Restaurant

& Tequila Bar

1380 Skippack Pike, Blue Bell, 610-239-9466.

www.elsarapebluebell.com.

Hours. Lunch: 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Mondays through Saturdays. Dinner: 5 to 9 p.m. Sundays and Tuesdays through Thursdays, 5 to 10 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays.

No smoking

Wheelchair accessible

Take-out available

Reservations accepted for parties of five or more

Price range. At lunch, crispy tostadas are \$4.50; the beef fajitas are \$10.75. At dinner, several of the appetizers, such as the enchiladas (\$8), make a meal by themselves. The menu tops out at \$23.99 for the camarones Culican (jumbo butterfly shrimp stuffed with crabmeat and bacon with a creamy tequila chipotle sauce).

Parking. El Sarape is in a small village of stores along Route 73 (Skippack Pike), just east of Route 202. There is plenty of parking throughout the shopping center.

What's the story? This is the second of three dining endeavors for Luis Marin. After moving here from his native Mexico in 1990, he opened Los Sarapes in Chalfont (co-owned with his father, Carlos) in 1992. El Sarape in Blue Bell came next in 2001, followed by Los Sarapes (Quakertown) in '03. Each site incorporates his mother's old-style recipes, fashioned into what Luis calls "cucina nueva: Mexican fusion with flare."

The scene. This cozy 60-seater is an energetic, richly colored space: bluish-purple, vibrant yellow and terra cotta create a festive, inviting vibe. The center of the room holds a small bar with just five stools, a great spot to relax and sample the vast selection of beers, sangria, tequilas and specialty cocktails.

What we had. My nephew was just days away from spring break in Puerto Vallarta, so I decided to prime him for his trip by treating him to El Sarape's central Mexican flavors. We shared the house-made guacamole (\$4.50, serves two) along with a tangy ceviche of fish, crabmeat and scallops marinated in lime juice (\$10). Each filling appetizer came with crunchy, baked tortilla chips. The young wayfarer enjoyed bisteces encebollados, broiled marinated steak topped with sauteed jalapenos, onions, garlic, spices and olive oil (\$16). My filete borracho (\$22.50) was tender orange roughy, grilled with jumbo shrimp and covered in a tequila lime sauce, accompanied by a salad, rice and grilled vegetables. My nephew easily downed his tres leches cake (OK, I helped), those three milks gushing from each fluffy forkful (\$5.75).

Chef's suggestions. Marin highly recommends his pollo Moctezuma: chicken cutlets stuffed with asparagus, spinach and pepper strips, wrapped in bacon and covered with a light moctezuma sauce (\$18.25), and his filete Toluca (\$23.95), a center-cut filet mignon with chorizo and Chihuahua cheese on a corn tortilla, smothered with a special chipotle/sausage sauce.

Nice touches. Tequila! El Sarape stocks more than 110 selections, from the unparalleled Porfidio Barrique (\$89 a shot) to Jose Cuervo 1800 (\$7). Tequila tastings are held throughout the year.

After you eat. Center Square Golf Club and Mermaid Swim and Golf Club are both minutes away; or continue west on Skippack Pike, into that town's quaint shopping village.

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