



THE NEWS PHOTOS/RODRIGO OROPEZA

Restaurante San Francisco is set within Casa Tlaxcala, a cultural center housed in an old colonial building downtown.

AUTHENTIC TLAXCALAN EATS

BY NICHOLAS GILMAN
Special to The News

Restaurante San Francisco offers up central Mexico's favorite dishes at lunchtime

Tlaxcala, the smallest state in Mexico, is a mountainous area east of Mexico City, surrounded on three sides by the state of Puebla. The Nahuatl name means "place of bread made with corn" (i.e. tortillas).

Hearty stews, thickened with seeds and nuts, lima beans and corn dishes are the norm in this landlocked state.

One of my most recent finds is the Restaurante San Francisco. Near the Museo San Ildefonso and housed in the Casa Tlaxcala, it serves authentic cuisine from the region. Open only for lunch, the reasonably-priced menu provides the opportunity to try some of Tlaxcala's best-known dishes.

Start with a "jarra verde Tlaxcala," a punch made with pulque, mint and lime. It's refreshing and delicious, the yeasty flavor of the pulque not overwhelming. There are a number of appetizers to start your meal. A good choice is the "platón Tlaxcalteco" offering a selection of regional cheeses, "antojitos" such as tamales and quesadillas, and chorizo – it's large and can easily be shared by four people.

While all the salads are nicely presented, it is the nopal salad, seasoned with cilantro and sprinkled with fresh cheese, that is particularly good. The soups are more interesting. The "sopa de habas con nopales," or lima



House speciality "Mole de olla" will not disappoint.

bean with cactus, is my favorite, and "crema de cilantro," a mild but aromatic creamed soup, a close second.

The featured entree is the "pipian Tizatlán," made with either pork or chicken. The smooth green sauce, which contains ground pumpkin seeds, chilies and aromatic green herbs is satisfying and earthy – you can tell this is Tlaxcalan comfort food. It differs from its Poblano cousin in the perfumy herbs used, which give it an exotic and complex aroma.

The "pollo Tocatlán" may be Tlaxcala's best known and most unusual dish. This savory stew is made with chicken and potatoes. The sauce, rich with roasted onions and tomatoes, smoky chilies and perfumy cinnamon, is thickened with amaranth, a grain

widely used in the region.

"Mole de olla," a soupy version of the Puebla classic, is filled with lima beans – it's perfect food for a chilly day.

For those feeling particularly carnivorous, try the pit-roasted "barbacoa," popular all over central Mexico, or the "cecina Zauapan," the Tlaxcala version of this popular dried and pounded meat.

Vegetarians don't need to despair here. Little burgers of "huazontle," a green herb that tastes of asparagus, are bathed in a spicy sauce made with dried shrimp. Squash blossom flowers stuffed with fresh cheese with flecks of epazote, are delectable.

There are some unusual desserts worth trying: "Espuma de agave," a mousse made with tequila, "panque de nopal," a sweet cactus cake, and

MORE INFO

Try tamales, cheeses and chorizo from Tlaxcala

Restaurante San Francisco
San Ildefonso 40, Centro
Tel. 5702-9110
Open 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. Monday through Saturday

my favorite, the refreshing "gelatina de jamaica," gelatin flavored with dried hibiscus flowers.

Nothing on the menu costs more than 100 pesos – a full meal will be around 150 per person, tops.

On the street a chalkboard announces a 48-peso "comida corrida," or full meal, but you won't find it on the menu inside, so ask your waiter for details.

San Francisco is a perfect place to bring out-of-towners during a tour of the sights – relaxing, traditional, and indisputably Mexican.

Nicholas Gilman is author of 'Good Food in Mexico City: A Guide to Food Stalls, Fondas and Fine Dining', available at all on-line booksellers. Visit his website: www.mexicocityfood.net