

LA TOMA DE TEQUILA

SERVES UP THE DISHES OF CHIHUAHUA

For a taste of northern Mexico's meats and cheeses, look no further than this cheerful spot in the Roma

BY NICHOLAS GILMAN
Special to The News

One great thing about our capital is the proliferation of restaurants specializing in regional cooking from all over the country. Almost every state is represented. While some, like Yucatán and Oaxaca are popular and easy to find, others are hidden away. So when a friend told me about the only place specializing in the regional cuisine of Chihuahua, I had to try it.

The largest state in Mexico is bordered on its northern edge by Texas and New Mexico. Chow-wise, the arid land doesn't produce a whole lot of fresh vegetables, so, naturally, meat's the thing: beef and lots of it.

The owner is on a mission to preserve regional cuisine.

Wheat tortillas are as common as corn and tacos are often made with wheat and referred to as burritas. Cheese is another important product. The state's large Mennonite population produces fresh and aged cheeses sold all over the country – their queso Chihuahua comes in several forms, including the well-known mild white, perfect for melting.

La Toma de Tequila, specializing in Chihuahuense cuisine, is a homey place where you will often find owner Raúl Vargas, a native of Chihuahua. Raúl's wife, however, is from Jalisco. This explains the incongruous use of "Tequila" in the restaurant's name (they really drink more beer up there).

Vargas, a gregarious gentleman who looks like a Texas cattle rancher, explained that

he and his family are on a mission: to rescue the cuisine of their home state and present it to the world. Because it is so near the U.S. border, local traditions are disappearing faster in Chihuahua than in other parts of Mexico. Many recipes come from the Vargas' family cookbooks. Ingredients such as special chilies, cheese, tortillas and even mezcal are imported for their authentic flavors.

Located on the second floor of an old house, the cheerful tablecloths, yellow walls, old wood floors and norteño-themed prints are warm and comforting. The small menu features meaty dishes such as two asados, meats (beef or pork), prepared in a red "colorado" or green "pasado" sauces, each featuring chilies of the same names flavored with herbs and cumin. They're served either as a main dish or as burritas, the filling wrapped in a long wheat tortilla.

Caldillo norteño is a revitalizing beef broth with shreds of "machaca" (air-dried beef), fresh meat and cubes of potatoes. The sopa de tortilla is fragrant with cumin and served with "chicharrón" (fried pork skin), avocado slices and roast chili strips.

The owner insisted I try his frijoles norteños, warning me that they take time to prepare. They're worth the wait; saucy dark beans are garnished with chunks of pungent warm Chihuahua cheese and dried toasted chilies. This could be eaten alone as a hearty soup course.

Pechuga de pollo norteña is a generous slab of grilled chicken breast, slathered with a delightfully complex roasted chili sauce and topped with grilled Chihuahua cheese.

If this all sounds too carnivorous, there are several



La Toma de Tequila offers a warm and comforting ambience.



Burritas de asado

salads on the menu as well, and cheese burritas can be prepared – you still get to sample the excellent salsas (watch out for the green one – it's not as harmless as it appears).

The lemonade is worth mentioning. It's not too sweet. The desserts, not on the menu, are exceptional. Try the flan baked in a mezcal sauce, or a thin slab of "ate de membrillo" (quince jelly). Be sure to ask for a sample

MORE INFO

Chihuahua has more to offer than those little dogs.

La Toma de Tequila
Toluca 28-C at Baja California, Col. Roma, near Centro Médico Metro station (use the Toluca exit)
Tel.: 5584 5250
Open: 1 p.m. to 8 p.m. daily. Prices range from \$150-250 pesos per person, including a drink.

of their house mezcal – one special bottle contains an entire rattlesnake, for those on a dare.

Prices are reasonable here, but be aware that credit cards are not accepted.

Nicholas Gilman is author of "Good Food in Mexico City: A Guide to Food Stalls, Fondas and Fine Dining," is available through all online booksellers. Visit his Web site: www.mexicocityfood.net

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