

## Mexican Favorites at El Parador

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Evan Sung for The New York Times

Lamb chops with guajillo chili sauce and white charro beans.

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KEEPING up with the sheer volume of new restaurants in New York can be daunting, not to mention disappointing. Being first through the door is never all it's cracked up to be. Why be a guinea pig?



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So when a number of friends — all of whom collect [Social Security](#) and stopped chasing passing fancies decades ago — said they'd gone back to El Parador recently and loved it, I listened. In a city with so many choices, the phenomenon of "everything old is new again" is never one to ignore. The new come and go, but only the good ones last, and this one is in its 52nd year. Not in NoLiTa or Dumbo, but a block from the F.D.R. Drive, on East 34th Street.

Earlier generations were drawn to El Parador's owner and maître d'hôtel, Carlos Jacott, a reportedly larger-than-life figure. In 1990, he sold the restaurant to Manuel Alejandro, a Spaniard, whose son, Jose, known as Alex, is both the

Breaded and stuffed jalapeños.

executive chef (he graduated from the French Culinary Institute) and Mr. Jacott's more reserved replacement in the dining room.

If you go at 8 p.m. or later, you miss the children's hour; El Parador has always embraced families. One friend started taking his daughters here in the late '60s. "Carlos used to take the kids into the kitchen to get the corn chips, see the [lobsters](#), say hello to everybody," said Mr. Alejandro, 42. "We still do that. It's how we've built our customer base, starting when they're children. We watch them grow up and then they come back here with their children."

When it came time to order, a friend guided me toward the house special, an enormous portion of garlic fried chicken. It was indeed terrific, as were the leftovers. ("I bet your whole refrigerator smelled of it," Mr. Alejandro said later. It did.) Old-timers also love the chili con carne at lunch (at dinner by request) and the guacamole anytime, skillfully orchestrated with hints of lime, salt and jalapeño. But what caught my eye was a note on the menu: "Feel free to ask for any old favorite dish."

I asked Mr. Alejandro for an example and he suggested an appetizer: pickled jalapeño peppers stuffed with chunky peanut butter, dipped in flour, egg and bread crumbs, then fried. "The story was that in Carlos's college days, all he had in the refrigerator were jalapeños and peanut butter," he said. "That was the legend passed down from the old bartenders and waiters."

I was skeptical. It seemed like the kind of dish whose success was commensurate with the number of margaritas imbibed before taking the first bite. Because of an unfortunate encounter at 14 with a bottle of tequila, a lime and a salt shaker, I must confess that I've never even tried a margarita. Which was music to Mr. Alejandro's ears.

"Why do people associate Mexican restaurants with total oblivion when it comes to drinking?" he asked, aggravated. "It's a restaurant, not a cantina. We have respect for good food and we've worked hard to bring the kitchen up to date. I didn't want El Parador to be known for tacos, tostadas and enchiladas. Mind you, we have customers who want that and we make it for them. But Mexican cuisine is not being perceived as sophisticated. So we've cleaned it up, just a little bit, and try to execute it with more elegance. The menu is drastically different from the old days. We've made the sauces lighter. People don't want to eat roux any more unless they're in New Orleans."

Well, the stuffed jalapeños didn't sound elegant, certainly. Until I tasted them. Peppery, sweet, crunchy and smooth all at once — a veritable poem of tastes and textures. It

may have started as a makeshift snack for a college student in the middle of the last century, but at \$8, this unlikely combination of humble supermarket ingredients was a contemporary triumph. How had I ever lived without it?

For an entree, I forced myself not to fall into the trap of ordering enchiladas, and went instead for grilled double-cut baby lamb chops with chipotle and garlic adobo rub, guajillo salsa and white charro beans. The flavors of the chilies and herbs were complex yet clean, and the efforts and presentation as up to date as those at any newly opened restaurant. And at \$27, certainly cheaper.

But I was so taken with those jalapeños, I considered ordering more for dessert. I knew that Mr. Alejandro would make them, but actually, I was too full. Next time. And the time after that and the time after that.

Rediscovering an oldie but a goodie has its benefits. Not just for the fond memories but the unexpected treasures. Keep that in mind if you're standing around some new joint in five-inch heels, being studiously ignored by the door attendant, trying to juggle your drink and your bag and hear the person next to you as the music blares and 90 minutes creep by before your table is ready. Jalapeños are frying on East 34th Street. If you miss them, you have only yourself to blame.

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