

FOODIE PROFILE

IT'S ALL GOOD

La Buena Vida keeps Mexican food real in south Fort Collins. BY RHEA MAZE

MY HUSBAND AND I don't typically broadcast the fact that I'm from California and he's from Texas—unless we're talking about Mexican food.

In that case, I'm a proud Cali beach girl food snob, and he's a know-it-all Austin foodie hipster. Good, fresh Mexican food is plentiful where we come from. Here in Colorado, not so much (no offense).

No one understands this better than Hugo and Maria Caballero. When they moved to Fort Collins from Apatzingán, near the Pacific Ocean in the state of Michoacán, Mexico and opened Los Tarascos restaurant near Old Town in 1995, they realized that many locals had a different definition of Mexican food.

"It was tough in the beginning," Hugo says. He wanted to showcase the artisanal, traditional recipes his family had been serving up in restaurants in both Mexico and southern California for generations, but many initial customers expected greasy, oversized plates with a side of queso.

The Caballeros quickly won the community over with their superb culinary skills and professional, friendly service.

Now, after over twenty years of growing up with Fort

SALUDOS!

La Buena Vida's margaritas are made with freshly juiced limes and vegetables, including cucumbers and jalapeños, and pureed fruits. "Our margaritas do not have any sweet and sour in them," says Hugo Jr. "They are also very strong for their size, and that's why two is our limit here."

Ladies enjoy two-for-one house and Cadillac margaritas as well as drinks from La Buena Vida's varied beer and wine list anytime on Thursdays. Gentlemen get the same treatment on Sundays—football, anyone?



The Caballero family (Hugo Sr., Maria, Hugo Jr., and Gema) puts a fresh (and lively) twist on Mexican specialties, such as Brocheta de Cameron and pomegranate martinis. The margs are all fresh (no mix!) and the atmosphere was inspired by a trip to Spain.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATTHEW GRAVES

Collins and perfecting recipes to suit their regulars' tastes (while also teaching them what real Mexican food is), the Caballeros are sharing the love with the south side of town. In January 2015, they opened La Buena Vida Authentic Michoacán Cuisine & Margarita Bar, which emphasizes lighter, classic dishes



THE SECRET'S IN THE SAUCES

La Buena Vida features dynamite house salsas, from the light, refreshing avocado salsa to the blazing red habanera salsa.

Roasted poblano peppers, tomatoes, and onions paired with high-quality sour cream serve as the base of La Buena Vida's most popular sauce. "Our poblano sauce kills it," says Hugo Jr. "We don't carry queso but when customers want something similar, we give them the poblano sauce—it's much better."

that burst with upscale flavor.

You won't find huge soggy portions you can't possibly finish, anything battered or fried, or kitschy sombreros here. A recent customer who ordered the charbroiled chipotle chicken tacos asked Maria why La Buena Vida's food didn't come with the requisite stomachache she had come to expect from Mexican food establishments.

"I laughed and explained that we make everything from scratch with whole, fresh ingredients," Maria says. "Nothing in our kitchen is store-bought or premade."

The entire menu is also gluten-free, unless you order a burrito or flour tortillas with your meal. "This is not only because Maria is gluten intolerant, but because in Mexico, we don't use flour," Hugo says.



On the reimagined menu, some classics, like sopapillas, remain.

Cabellero family took to the heart of Madrid. There, they visited Botín, the oldest restaurant in the world according to the *Guinness Book of World Records*, which reminded them of Mexico.

"We cut the brick, sanded the tables, and renovated this space ourselves, piece-by-piece," Hugo says. The labor of love paid off, and combined with the traditional music and smiling staff, La Buena Vida's atmosphere is a comfortable and inviting culinary escape.

"When people who know what authentic food is come to our restaurants, they fall in love and become customers for life," Hugo says. "We are successful because we love what we do—this is our passion."

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