

¡QUE RICO!



BY ALLEGRA HUSTON PHOTOS BY JEFF SPICER

DRIVE SOUTH: ¡QUE RICO! GOES ON A ROAD TRIP

Do you find it as hard to leave Taos as I do? When I lived in London, I used to love traveling to exotic places like Morocco and Cambodia. Now I'm as content to look out over 100 miles of receding volcanic horizons as I am to look out over an ocean. And the hidden corners of Northern New Mexico are as intriguing as foreign places.

Who would expect to find a trapeze school and theater in a remote mountain town like Peñasco? Or a stunningly beautiful sculpted cave, complete with electricity and running water, next to the Río Grande in Embudo? If you need an excuse to check these things out, the Dixon Studio Tour takes place Nov. 5 and 6 this year (dixonarts.org). And afterward, to enjoy a delicious meal in a lovely old adobe-walled room, with the bustle of the modern world far, far away.

Having said that, **SUGAR NYMPHS** bistro in Peñasco was more bustling on the night I was there than many restaurants in metropolitan Taos. All eight tables were taken, and as soon as one party left another arrived. Before I went, I found it hard to believe that a place as small as Peñasco could support a restaurant of his quality; more fool me. And the drive—about half an hour each way from the middle of Taos—was a bonus, not a chore: golden autumn foliage glowing in the sunset on the way there; tendrils of ghostly mist decorating the night on the way back.

Sugar Nymphs is part of the same building as the theater, though it's a separate establishment. It was opened in 2002 by chef Kai Harper

Leah and pastry chef Ki Holste. Indeed, the desserts are spectacular, and on this one night at least, there were more dessert choices than entrees! (Not counting the pizza menu, that is, which is a whole separate thing.)

The dining room is warm and cozy, with walls painted very like I painted the bathroom in my old house: rust-colored for the bottom three feet, and barley yellow above. The paintings, in a colorful folk art style with a Coney Island vibe, are by the chef herself. A bookcase holds cookbooks; a curlicue, circus-like clock dominates the front wall; a vast stove occupies one corner, and heats the restaurant in the winter. The colorful print tablecloths are covered with paper, and each table has a cup of crayons. I was too busy savoring the complimentary homemade focaccia, served with good olive oil and balsamic vinegar, to even think of drawing.

The menu changes frequently. Sugar Nymphs' award-winning green chile bison stew wasn't on it the night I went, nor were the famous chipotle pork medallions. I chose the Zuni stew of squash, corn, and other autumn vegetables (\$12.95), while my companion had the green chile chicken stew (\$12.95). Both came with chunky, buttery mashed potatoes. This was comfort food, but without the blandness; both stews were fresh-tasting and full of flavor. When you eat locally grown organic produce like this, you can almost feel the nutrients infusing your cells.

We regretted not ordering the goat cheese salad (\$9.95) to start; it

looked so good on the next table. So did the pizzas: hand-tossed, plump and puffy around the edges but thin-crust below, topped with brightly colored cut peppers as well as all the usual things.

But by this time we were heading toward dessert. With a pang we bypassed the chocolate cake (\$7), the pumpkin bundt, the plum küchen, and the chocolate pecan pie (all \$6) in favor of an oaty nectarine and raspberry crisp (\$6) and the almost legendary carrot cake (\$7). It takes a lot for a carrot cake to impress me: I pride myself on my own, perfected over years of bake sales. But Sugar Nymphs' version deserves its towering reputation.

And I do mean towering. The cake itself is maybe six inches tall: two generous layers of airy, carrot, nutty goodness, moist and spicy, with just the slightest tang of pineapple and just the right amount of cream-cheese frosting, which punctuated with decorative dollops that make you feel like you're being given an extra treat. One slice would comfortably feed four. Or, as I did, save the other half for breakfast.

And so down into the Gorge, to Dixon and Embudo. I lived in Taos for probably 15 years before I first stopped at **SUGAR'S**, on State Road 68: it's that corrugated metal trailer beside the big green lawn with a few picnic tables outside and a sign saying "Ice Cream." If it said "Barbecue," as it ought to, I'd have stopped long before. To be fair, the building itself, some distance from the road, does advertise "bar-b-que" but it's a bit hard to read from the highway. That said, even the New York Times has praised Sugar's barbecue. I like mine wrapped burrito-style, which isn't technically on the menu (though a "brisket burrito" and a "sausage burrito" are, \$5.99) and seems to require a bit more explanation than you might expect—but persevere! Named as one of Gourmet magazine's "10 Best

Drive-ins," Sugar's is also well known for its Sugar Burger (\$6.99), which was deemed by the New Mexico Tourism Department as worthy of inclusion on the Green Chile Cheeseburger Trail (newmexico.org/green-chile-cheeseburger/).

Sugar's is open till 6 p.m. But if it's lunchtime, or earlier, and you want more of a dine-in experience, head a couple of miles up the Dixon road (State Road 75) to **ZULY'S**. (They also serve dinner on Fridays and Saturdays.) It's far enough from State Road 68 to be a destination, rather than a stop-by—but it's worth it. Here you will find more picnic tables in a little fenced garden, studded with impressively large boulders, which looks out onto the lush fields and orchards lining the Embudo River, as well as—for colder days—a beautiful dining room with hand-peeled vigas and golden adobe walls not unlike those up the mountain at Sugar Nymphs. The menu is traditional Northern New Mexican with an abundance of shrimp dishes that reflect co-owner Zulema Garcia-Chilton's origins in the Mexican state of Nayarit (her husband Chalako Chilton, the chef, was born and raised in Dixon).

The shrimp is noticeably good: served al mojo de ajo (sautéed with garlic), in enchiladas, or in tacos heaped with fresh tomatoes (all \$14.95). Chalako sources as much local produce as possible; in late summer/early fall, the calabacitas, cucumbers, tomatoes, lettuces and chile were all Dixon-grown. The burger, too, was excellent, made with all-natural New Mexico beef (from \$7.25).

And, like Sugar Nymphs, they also have excellent coffee, as well as milkshakes and floats, and homemade pies, cookies and brownies. The care that Chalako and Zuly take is evident everywhere: to the delight of the boys I dined with, the chai comes with a sprinkle of cinnamon on top. ■