

VENUE

Friday, February 18, 2011 venue

SANTA FE DINING

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Heal those scars of bad-pizza childhood

By ANNE HILLERMAN
For the Journal

Pizza Centro opened in the Design Center a little more than a year ago, first in the space formerly occupied by the legendary Carlos' Gospel Cafe, more recently relocated to the front of the building facing Cerrillos Road/Galisteo. The mother ship location seems to be thriving in Eldorado's Agora Center.

Owner/chef Nathan Aufrichtig (the brother of CounterCulture's Jason Aufrichtig) is the real deal. He worked as a pizza maker in New York before putting his skills to work here.

Some folks, I formerly among them, find it hard to get excited about pizza. My (former) indifference comes from growing up in Santa Fe, where pizza came frozen in a box.

On rare special occasions I remember the great fun of making pizza with my mom and siblings, adding tomato sauce to the dough, a layer of seasoned ground beef or perhaps little circles of pepperoni, and a handful of cheese. Dad was a meat-and-potatoes kind of guy, so homemade pizza meant a rare special occasion.

But Pizza Centro makes pizza worth getting excited about. I love this pizza, from crust to topping, from the mellow marinara to the rich, silky whole-milk mozzarella. The sauce is made from scratch and the dough mixed a day ahead so it has time to rise and to sit. Salads come with house-made dressings. Pizza Centro rocks!

Part of the joy is the smell. Enter either the Santa Fe or the Eldorado location, and you're greeted with the warm aroma of yeast, cheese, meat, perhaps a waft of garlic. You can eat here if you want to, but on both my visits the other customers were taking their food home. You can create your own pizza, starting with the basic cheese and tomato sauce (\$12/small) and adding toppings like green chile, mushrooms, pepperoni, pineapple, etc. for \$1.25 each, or fancier stuff like artichoke hearts, house-made meatballs and truffle oil for \$1.75. Or make it easy on yourself and order one of the "specialty" pizzas.



EDDIE MOORE/JOURNAL

Pizza Centro offers foodies a chance to get pizza at its two locations in Santa Fe and Eldorado.

On my first visit, I met friends at the Eldorado location. None of us had tried Pizza Centro, so each ordered a different specialty pizza (\$17 for a small). This is thin crust, New York-style pizza, and the kitchen applies the topping with a generous hand.

The names reflect the New York connection: Central Park, Chelsea, Chinatown, Hell's Kitchen, Little Italy, Times Square and more. I picked Alphabet City (named for New York's East Village) and enjoyed probably the best veggie pizza I've ever had.

The toppings included flash-fried eggplant, sliced mushrooms, fresh baby spinach leaves, sweet artichoke hearts, savory sun-dried tomatoes with a bit of chew to them and wonderful fresh garlic. I think you could serve this to a diehard carnivore, and he wouldn't even miss the pepperoni.

Speaking of meat, I loved the Chelsea with sausage, tiny meatballs and wonderful bits of smoky bacon all dressed up with pretty thin strips of bell pepper on top. Hell's Kitchen is a delicious creation designed for palates used to the heat of New Mexican food.

With both green chile and

jalapeños as well as sausage and flash-fried eggplant, it's hearty, filling and beautiful.

At the downtown location, famous for its drive-up window, a friend and I picked up a meal-sized Greek salad (\$7) in addition to pizza. In addition to fresh romaine lettuce, it had plenty of feta cheese, pungent kalamata olives and slices of roma tomatoes. Instead of the vinaigrette specified, the server gave us the Caesar dressing, probably a mistake. I liked its robustness, although it didn't go with the strong flavors of the Greek salad.

Is \$17 too much for an absolutely fabulous small pizza when you can get a large-but-ordinary pizza from Pizzamart for \$10? Think of it this way: If you order a fancy pizza, buy a bag of salad greens and make up a little oil and vinegar dressing to go with them and add a couple of beers, you have a gourmet dinner for two for \$25. In my book, that's a good deal, and you're supporting a local business.

Pizza Centro

★★★

LOCATION: Santa Fe Design Center, 418 Cerrillos Road, Santa Fe, 505-988-8825

Eldorado Agora Center, 7 Avenida Vista Grande, #D8, Eldorado, 505-466-3161

HOURS: 11:30 a.m.-8:30 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays (Santa Fe)

11:30 a.m.-8 p.m. Wednesdays-Sundays (Eldorado)

BEER AND WINE