



El Paragua

603 Santa Cruz Road, Española; 505-753-3211
www.elparagua.com

Brunch, lunch, and dinner
 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Mondays-Thursdays;
 11 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. Fridays; 10 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. Saturdays;
 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Sundays

- Takeout available
- Handicapped accessible
- Vegetarian options
- Noise level: convivial
- Full bar
- Credit cards, no checks



The Short Order

For 60 years, people have come to Española to dine at El Paragua, a family-owned establishment near the intersection of U.S. 84/285 and Santa Cruz Road. It's no wonder: From the excellent cuisine to the rarefied old-school atmosphere, the place casts a spell. Recommended: Caldo tlalpeño, shredded chicken tacos, enchiladas Atencio, carne asada al estilo tampiqueña, and sopaipillas with house-made seasonal preserves.

Guest Check

Dinner for two at El Paragua:	
Carne asada al estilo tampiqueña	\$ 32.00
Enchiladas Atencio	\$ 14.75
(with blue corn tortillas)	\$ 1.50
Cup, caldo tlalpeño	\$ 5.50
Dulces natillas	\$ 6.75
TOTAL	\$ 60.50
<i>(before tax and tip)</i>	
Brunch for four, another visit:	
House margarita (2)	\$ 16.00
Breakfast burrito	\$ 9.50
Chicken taco plate	\$ 14.50
Huevos rancheros	\$ 9.50
Chiles rellenos	\$ 17.75
Side, red chile	\$ 2.75
TOTAL	\$ 70.00
<i>(before tax and tip)</i>	

Molly Boyle | The New Mexican

Under the umbrella

At the end of our monsoon season (or really, whenever it rains), residents tend to make one remark in particular. When a downpour subsides and the sun re-emerges, one person might nod to the other, and then someone utters the simple phrase, “We needed it.”

Lately, I've thought about that saying — an expression of gratitude for the elements — on trips to and from Española, where I've enjoyed memorable meals at El Paragua, the venerable establishment just off U.S. 84/285. El Paragua's legacy — which includes its cuisine, atmosphere, patrons, and staff — seems to embody a similar ideal of essentialism: Like the rain sustains the land, this restaurant nourishes its people.

The restaurant's origins are storybook: In 1958, the two elder Atencio brothers began selling their mother's beef tacos and pork tamales under a colorful patio umbrella on the highway to Taos. Years later, the family opened El Paragua, converting their old tack room into a restaurant named after the umbrella. (Thus was also born El Parasol, a fast-food taco wagon offshoot with five locations in Northern New Mexico.)

The place casts a spell. A meal at El Paragua can be an aesthetic study in the charm of multiple textures — from the bar, with its tree growing through to the second floor and the roof beyond; to the vestibule's vintage royal-blue cookstove, near which you're likely to spot a cook shaping masa dough; to the dimly lit juxtaposition of old cobblestones, latillas, Spanish tile, and bright stained-glass umbrella windows in the downstairs dining room. The overall ambience is rarefied yet cozy. Decades of reviews from major media outlets are mounted on the walls, crowding photographs of the Atencios. In 1985, the *New York Times* crowed, “El Paragua is a place on which a food critic can stake his reputation. There are no more authentic New Mexican kitchens like this.”

Browsing El Paragua's current menu, I found as many items of strictly Mexican provenance than New Mexico specialties. But no matter the dishes' origins, they're pretty much all good. Whether at brunch or at dinner, meals begin with an old-school side salad of crisp iceberg lettuce, fresh shaved carrots, and slivers of purple cabbage drizzled with an addictively tangy orange-hued Italian-style dressing, about which our server refused to disclose even a single ingredient. (“Family recipe,” she demurred.)

For dinner, we chose two classic entrees: enchiladas Atencio, a creamy blend of chicken, mushrooms, and onions rolled in corn tortillas and topped with green

chile; and the carne asada al estilo tampiqueña, a sizeable rib-eye steak crowned with a whole roasted green chile. Each dish was transcendent. The enchiladas featured earthy sauteed mushrooms that gave way to soft, spicy chicken; bathed in decadent cream and smothered in hot chile, the dish was accompanied by rich cowboy-style pintos and Spanish rice. The juicy, tender rib-eye sported an impeccable char and seasoning and was flanked by creamy guacamole, refried beans, and an oozing rolled cheese enchilada. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had such an exemplary steak dinner. Our dessert of cinnamon-dusted natillas was thick and luscious.

At Sunday brunch, the festive rainbow streaming through the windows coaxed us into a couple of tart-sweet margaritas. The huevos rancheros, which I ordered scrambled, arrived with eggs atop a large flour tortilla and with separate piles of sausage, refried beans, rice, and green chile. I liked the deconstructed nature of these huevos,

which allowed me to retrofit every bite with bits of each ingredient. The caldo tlalpeño — a compelling blend of tender stewed chicken chunks, chickpeas, and chiles served with sliced avocado — had a smoky-spicy cures-what-ails-you broth, and each steamy spoonful had a piquant flavor. Chiles rellenos were covered in soggy breading and stuffed with just tomato and onion; though I enjoyed the veggies, I missed the cheesy goodness and the crunch of other rellenos.

A plate of shredded chicken tacos turned out to be the deluxe, extra-fresh version of the chicken-guacamole taco I usually pick up from El Parasol in town — truly a restaurant-quality replica of a fast-food standby. The massive breakfast burrito arrived with half its grill-marked trunk glazed in red chile, the other half sporting a chunky green-chile finish. Its blend of scrambled egg, potatoes, and cheese, constituted a savvy combination of flavors.

Touches on the plates tend toward the sweetly retro — a generous portion of guacamole is dolloped into a lettuce cup and finished with a large black olive, and many dishes include a traditional parsley garnish. At the end of a meal, relishing a set of puffy sopaipillas with ambrosial house-made peach preserves, I found myself thankful for the old ways, which do quite often turn out to be the best ways. Greeted by a downpour outside the restaurant, my companion turned to me as we found ourselves saying, nearly in unison, “We needed it.” ◀

For 60 years,
 people have come to dine
 at El Paragua, and it's no wonder:
 The place casts a spell.