

DINING

Arriba puts emphasis on 'authentic'

BY HUGH GALLAGHER
STAFF WRITER

All places go through a life cycle, some longer, some shorter. You fight to extend the life cycle, stay in touch with people and the market," said Dennis Serras. After 21 years, Ann Arbor's Maude's had run its cycle and Serras and his partners in Mainstreet Ventures had to decide what to do with the downtown Ann Arbor restaurant that had once been "the place for ribs." In March Maude's became Arriba, a Mexican restaurant with an emphasis on "authentic." "Maude's was here 21 years. It reached its life cycle. It was successful and made money until the day we closed it," Serras said.

The first thought was to redo Maude's to help it fit into the ever-changing downtown Ann Arbor mix, which includes Mainstreet's other ventures Gratz's, Real Seafood and Paillo's.

Maude's opened in 1977 as a "high-class" hamburger joint with specialty burgers at higher prices. Then the restaurant introduced baby back ribs and became a downtown mainstay.

"We were thinking of a Michigan theme with apples, Michigan cherries, something, but no one was real excited by it," Serras said.

Then someone suggested Mexican.

"We said Mexican and we didn't understand Mexican at all, I was thinking refried beans and cheese," Serras said.

Serras, Executive Chef Simon Pesusich and others hit the road to find out what Mexican food was all about. They went to Texas, Mexico and California.

"Then in La Jolla, someone told us about this hole in the wall," Serras said.

Here was a different kind of Mexican food - quesadillas made of masa into turnovers, boat-shaped masa cakes called sopas, a variety of chile sauces, unusual cheeses and no Monterey Jack. This was lighter, fresher than the Tex-Mex food served at chain Mexican restaurants.

Arriba
What: Mexican restaurant emphasizing authentic regional Mexican dishes.
Alcohol: yes
Cost: Entrees, \$6.95-\$13.95; appetizers, \$4.95-\$5.75; salads, \$2.95-\$8.75.
Where: 314 S. Fourth St., Ann Arbor
Reservations: For parties of six or more, (734) 662-8485.
Hours: 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday-Thursday; 11 a.m. to 1 a.m. Friday; 4-11 p.m. Saturday; 4-9 p.m. Sunday.
Credit: All major credit cards.

The next step was to send Pesusich to Chicago.

That's where Rick Bayless has been serving a variety of regional Mexican dishes at his Frontera Restaurant. Pesusich trained for several weeks at Bayless' restaurant and came away with a new respect for Mexican food. Bayless operates a haute-cuisine sister restaurant to Frontera, Topolobampo as well.

The more I studied, the more excited I got. I stayed up to 4 or 5 in the morning reading about it and getting excited," Pesusich said.

The Arriba menu has been kept deliberately small, manageable with items that may have names similar to other area Mexican restaurants but are really very different. The one thing that is like other restaurants is and is not "authentic" is three kinds of fajitas, those flaming, grilled, tortilla-wrapped sandwiches.

"That's the skeleton in our closet," Serras said.

But here, Pesusich has created a winner, fajitas made with portobello mushrooms. They are outselling the chicken and steak variety.

The other dishes provide taste surprises. Appetizers include such unusual items as quesadillas capitalinas, corn masa turnovers stuffed with chihuahua cheese, chile and



Mexican cuisine: Chef Robert Hart, (left), and executive Chef Simon Pesusich display some of Arriba's unusual dishes, clockwise from left, Entremes Surtido, an appetizer; Carne Asada, a steak entree; and, for dessert, chocolate bread pudding with Kahlua sauce.

guacamole; sopas rancheros, small corn masa toasts with shredded beef and aged Mexican cheese; and for a sampling of items entremes surtido.

The specialties include a chargrilled chicken breast in a sauce of chile ancho and red wine with bacon and winter squash puree; garlic and spice rubbed shrimp; chargrilled; and carne asada, marinated grilled top sirloin with guajillo chile sauce.

Tacos at Arriba are not like the traditional little corn chip sandwiches, as some disappointed customers discovered. For others the tacos de uirga de verduras, a vegetarian plate with zucchini, mushrooms and avocado was a pleasant surprise. The taquitos are crisp rolled tortillas with chicken and poblano chiles. Enchiladas feature chicken with a red mole sauce, the Mexican chocolate sauce used in many recipes.

Desserts include a flan, a chocolate bread pudding, a lime custard and, Pesusich's favorite, a rum raisin rice pudding.

Arriba has the usual offering of Mexican, domestic and imported beers, wines and margaritas.

"This is the most complex thing I've done here," said Pesusich. "It was strange and new to me. I've spent hours and hours getting ready to understand it."

In the weeks ahead Pesusich said he will be introducing a limited number of specials.

In addition to new food, Arriba needed a new look. Serras said they worked with a designer from Cincinnati to develop the eye-popping design with its emphasis on bright primary colors, Mexican artifacts and suggestions of Old Mexico.

"Whatever we created was an illusion of what people may think it's like there. What is authentic

is the colorfulness, bright reds and blues," Serras said.

Color is everywhere from striped snake sticks over the bar to a multi-colored fabric hanging suggesting chiles to green castles. At the center of everything is a plaster tree festooned with lanterns. The tree and the adobe shaped booths and clay patterned floor suggest a courtyard.

To add to the "illusion," a mariachi band strolls through Arriba 6:30-9:30 p.m. Wednesday-Friday.

"We did this in three weeks and two days," Serras said. "We're at our best when we create things. We've never used a concept more than once. We've got seafood, northern Italian, Tuscan and now Mexican."

Next up for Mainstreet will be a high-end steakhouse next to Gratz's on Main Street later this

carved roast beef, Honey Baked Ham, Roasted Chicken, salad bar, dessert table and more.

EATING OUT IN THE SUBURBS

Just in case you missed it, or lost the paper. Here are some of the restaurants we've recently visited.

Mountain King Chinese Restaurant - Where: 469 Old Woodward, Birmingham (248) 644-2913. Hours: 11 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. Monday-Thursday; until 10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday; noon to 9 p.m. Sunday. Menu: Mandarin, Szechuan and Cantonese specialties served at lunch and dinner.

Cost: Lunch specials \$5-\$6. Dinner \$5.50-\$11. Multi-course family dinners for 2-6 people \$21-\$50. Reservations: Accepted.

Credit cards: All majors accepted.

Flying Fish Tavern - Where: 6480 Orchard Lake Road, (corner of Maple Road) West Bloomfield (248) 865-8888.

Hours: 11 a.m. to 1 a.m. Monday-Thursday; 11 a.m. to 2 a.m. Friday and Saturday; 3 p.m. to midnight Sunday. Menu: Casual neighborhood family eatery serves comfort foods with special focus on fresh catches of the day. Cost: Appetizers and dinner salads \$4-\$8; sandwiches and burgers \$5.50-\$7; pastas \$7-\$9; big plates, specials and catch of the day \$20-\$15; desserts \$2-\$4. Reservations: For parties of six or more only. Credit cards: All majors accepted.

Wood-Ruff's - Where: 212 W. Sixth St., Royal Oak, (248) 589-1519. Hours: Monday through Saturday 4 p.m. to 2 a.m., Sundays 4-9 p.m. Menu: Modern culinary twists on classics such as steaks, chops, duck and seafood served in a highly stylized, adult supper-club atmosphere where jazz is king of sound. Cost: Starters \$3-\$7. Entrees \$14-\$24 accompanied by salad, starch as appropriate and vegetable garnish. Reservations: Recommended. Credit cards: All majors accepted.

O'Grady's Irish Pub - 685 W. Big Beaver, Troy, (248) 624-4770. Open 11-2 a.m. Monday-Saturday; noon to 1 a.m. Sunday. Menu: Irish theme, emphasis on fresh is best. More than 75 menu items. Cost: Starters and soups \$3-\$7; burgers and sandwiches \$6-\$8; Irish specialties \$10; chicken, seafood, beef and ribs \$8.50-\$15. Reservations: Not accepted. Credit cards: All majors accepted.

EASTER BRUNCH

Big Rock Chop & Brew - 245 S. Eton Street, Birmingham (248) 647-7774, beginning 10:30 a.m. with lunch entrees beginning at \$12. Dinner follows with entrees starting

at \$17. Executive chef Randy Smith has been working overtime to prepare for his first Easter at Big Rock. Menu features Double cut Lamb Chops, Moroccan Sea

Scallops with Orange Ginger Sauce, Baked Ham with Brandied Peaches, and Savory Bread Pudding with Pheasant Sausage.

Encore - 1801 S. Telegraph in the Bloomfield Hills Quality Inn, (248) 335-3790, 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Cost \$12.95 per person, children 5-12, \$6, children under 5 dine free.

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