

= Esparza 's =

Esparza 's Tex Mex Cafe , or simply Esparza 's , was a Tex @-@ Mex restaurant in Portland , Oregon , in the United States . Opened by Martha and Joe Esparza in 1990 , the restaurant operated for more than 24 years before closing in January 2014 . Its unusual menu included buffalo tostadas , ground ostrich and nopalitos , several varieties of tongue , beef brisket , and more traditional options such as enchiladas , quesadillas , tacos and tamales . Esparza 's was one of Portland 's most popular restaurants during the 1990s and was named " Restaurant of the Year " by The Oregonian in 1992 .

= = Description and history = =

Esparza 's , located at the intersection of SE 28th Avenue and SE Ankeny Street in Portland 's Buckman neighborhood , served Tex @-@ Mex cuisine . Opening in 1990 , it became one of Portland 's most popular restaurants . The Portland Mercury described Esparza 's as a " quaint little cafe " with " interesting " menu options , including buffalo tostadas , ground ostrich and nopalitos (cactus deep @-@ fried in cornmeal batter) . It served several varieties of tongue , including beef , buffalo , calf , lamb , pork and venison . The menu also included beef brisket (" Smiley Burnette ") and more traditional options such as enchiladas , quesadillas , tacos and tamales , with most entrees ranging from \$ 9 ? 11 . The most expensive entree on the menu cost \$ 12 @.@ 95 , making Esparza 's known for its reasonable pricing .

The restaurant 's owners , Martha and Joe Esparza , shared four of their recipes with The Oregonian between 1990 and 2002 . Joe 's recipe for " Texas @-@ Style Chili Colorado " was based on one his mother made during his childhood in Uvalde , Texas . His mother disliked short @-@ cut cooking and instead used ground chilies and other seasonings . Joe used a similar method , and his recipe was considered one of Esparza 's signature dishes . In 1994 , Martha shared her recipe for " Studie Mae 's Sweet Potato Pecan Pie " , which came from her mother , who would make it on Sundays while growing up in Mineola , Texas . Joe 's " Nopalito Ranchero " recipe , which he shared with The Oregonian in 1996 , became popular after guests " got over their squeamishness over eating cactus leaves " . The recipe for " Turkey Guiso a la Tex @-@ Mex " (guiso is a type of stew) , was shared in 2002 and has been recommended for utilizing leftover Thanksgiving turkey . Esparza 's " Dirty Bird " recipe was shared on the Food Network 's The Best Of : Spicy Foods .

= = = Closure = = =

In January 2014 , the restaurant was closed temporarily for renovations , with no timeline offered for the project . The Oregonian also reported that the restaurant 's phone number was disconnected and its website inactive . Signage confirmed the closure , stating : " Esparza 's will be temporarily closed while renovating and regrouping . Thank you for your patience . We will re @-@ open soon . " However , several days later , the owners confirmed the restaurant 's permanent closure , posting a note that said : " We have closed our business after 24 years . We would like to thank you for supporting us . We have enjoyed the friendships made over the years . We are starting a new chapter in our lives ? relaxing and enjoying life . Thank you for your support . " The Oregonian published an article containing memories of the restaurant submitted by readers . Esparza 's was replaced by The Blue Goose , a " Southwestern @-@ grill @-@ meets @-@ New @-@ Mexico " restaurant serving Mexican and Tex @-@ Mex cuisine , named after the neighborhood tavern of similar title that occupied the building .

= = Reception = =

The restaurant received a mostly positive reception , including " glowing " reviews in Bon Appétit and The New York Times . In 1992 , Esparza 's was named The Oregonian 's " Restaurant of the Year " . According to the paper , the restaurant played an important role in developing NE and SE

28th Avenue as a food destination . Portland Monthly called the food " so @-@ so " , but noted its menu , outdoor patio and jukebox , encouraging people to " bask in the indecipherable harmonies of norteño polka crackling from the vintage vinyl @-@ and @-@ neon Wurlitzer " .

Esparza 's was highlighted in numerous travel guides of Portland . Fodor 's published , " Be prepared for south @-@ of @-@ the @-@ border craziness at this beloved local eatery . Wild West kitsch festoons the walls , but it isn 't any wilder than some of the entrées that emerge from chef @-@ owner Joe Esparza 's kitchen . " In her book *Insiders ' Guide to Portland , Oregon* , Rachel Dresbeck called the menu " spicy , flavorful , and tantalizingly aromatic " , and described the atmosphere as " 1950s Texas soda shop ? just the right accent to complement the hearty fare " . Yahoo ! Travel called the restaurant " fun , wild and woolly " , offering food " in the true tradition of the Lone Star State " . Yahoo ! recommended the chile rellenos , ostrich enchiladas , or nopalito for a unique dining experience .

The restaurant did not receive universal acclaim , however . In a negative review for *The Portland Mercury* in 2000 , Robin Rosenberg wrote :

... one expects the food at Esparza 's to be something special ; You might think that the line trickling out the door on a Thursday night is an indication of exceptional Tex @-@ Mex , worth a considerable sum . Well , certainly , Esparza 's décor , an amalgam of Western nostalgia , Texan brawn , and Tijuana cheese is executed with flair . Unfortunately though , no thematic coup can compensate for the fact that Esparza 's food rarely exceeds mediocre , and never lives up to its price ... The bulk of the clientele resides in a comfortable economic bracket and come down to the gritty Eastside to quaff top shelf margaritas and feast on manic kitsch . The hot corn chips and fresh salsa , which come fast and free , are the height of the meal . Smoked salmon enchiladas are just wrong ; No quantity of barbecue sauce (in this case , cloying and acrid) is going to improve a tough , dry brisket . The pork tacos are equally dry , but the ground buffalo enchiladas are very macho and spicy (though they will linger painfully) ... The beans and rice that accompany most entrees are utterly flavorless , a gratuitous use of space on the plate . Some people like beans and rice ; Esparza 's doesn 't seem to care . It 's a troublesome adage , ' you get what you pay for , ' when you 've gorged on flash and formula ? and yet , you 're starved for a good meal .

Following the restaurant 's closure , *The Oregonian* 's Grant Butler called the run that it had " remarkable " . He recalled , " [W] hen Esparza 's opened in 1990 , it broke the mold of what Mexican fare in Portland could be . Instead of combination plates blanketed in shrouds of sour cream and melted cheddar , Esparza 's served dishes that few people in Portlanders [sic] had ever experienced at the time " .