

The real thing | Centro excels at authentic Latin fare

By Meg Tilton
Camera Dining Critic

This past spring, Rhumba closed and reopened as Centro Latin Kitchen and Refreshment Palace. One reason for the change was that Big Red F, the restaurant's parent company, wanted a place that was known for its kitchen as well as its bar.

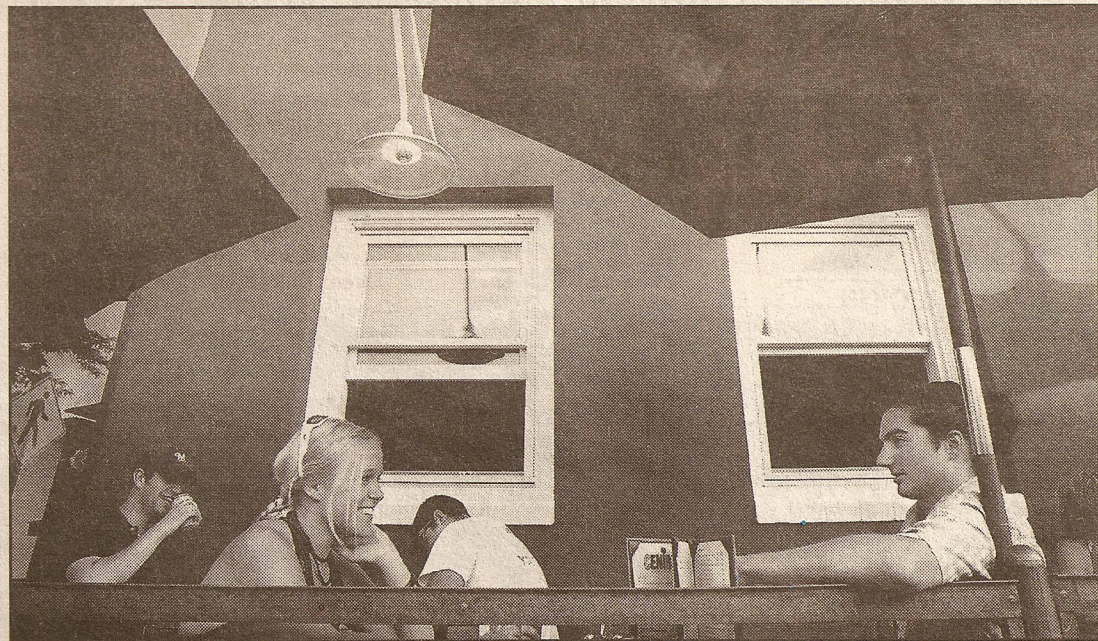
It's easy to see why the old restaurant had become known for drinks. With \$3 cocktails like the Mojito and the Dark & Stormy, Rhumba's happy hour was one of the best in town. Those specialty cocktails are still available, but the only one that's made Centro's current happy hour list is the Cuba Libre (\$1), a combination of rum, Coke and lime.

Still, the restaurant remains a wonderful hangout spot. It's got one of the nicest outdoor patios in Boulder, one that's shady in the afternoon and features a view to west Pearl Street. And the restaurant's new menu is worth checking out. While Rhumba's cuisine was Caribbean, with dishes like jerk meats, Centro's Latin food reflects the flavors of Central and South America.

One tasty new starter is the chile relleno with ranchero sauce (\$6). I enjoyed this dish even though I'm not a big chile fan — the rich, almost wintery sauce nicely balanced the fried peppers and soft cheese. Another good appetizer is the mashed avocado salsa (\$7). The avocados come from a big, eight-tiered rack near the kitchen, which as far as I can tell has never produced a single bad avocado, and the tortilla chips accompanying this dish are slightly greasy and utterly delicious.

As far as entrées go, the burrito (\$15) is a smart choice. Centro's version comes packed with chicken, shrimp, chorizo, rice, cheese, chiles and other vegetables like beans, mushrooms and red peppers. The many varied flavors and deep, not-too-spicy chile sauce puts this burrito in a different class than most.

Centro's seafood dishes also stand out. The chimichurri mussel cazuela (\$7) features a



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Leah Walsh, of California, talks with Josh Popky, of Boulder, on the north patio of Centro in Boulder.

piquant broth and crusty French bread for dipping. And a ruby red trout special (\$18) that was being served on my first visit was delicious. The trout was stuffed with crab meat, then covered in a three-pepper cream sauce delicate enough to let the fish shine through.

There are a few things I didn't like at Centro, but I should mention first that I don't enjoy spicy Latin food that much — so if you do, by all means draw your own conclusions. At any rate, the green pepper sauce on the seafood and potato enchilada suiza (\$14) seemed too strong to me. Same with a spicy pork adobo. But Centro's menu is still being tweaked in response to customer feedback, and the pork has disappeared from the menu since I sampled it.

Another thing the restaurant could work on is presentation, which at times lacks appeal. The colors of the food — the brown of the adobo, the red Spanish rice, and the yellowish green pepper sauces — can be bit off-putting, even if they're natural and authentic.

Just the opposite is Centro's beautiful burnt mango and lime pie (\$4 at lunch/\$7 at dinner), which features a bright, shard-like layer of caramelized mango

atop the Key lime filling. The dish tastes as good as it looks, too. The fried banana (\$7) is another treat, with coffee ice cream, a sweet, crisp banana rolled in cinnamon sugar, and a very intense and very tasty chocolate-and-coffee sauce.

Although the restaurant's makeover has focused mostly on food, the bar offerings also have changed to reflect the new Latin theme. The wine list now includes a number of South American wines. And Centro also serves pisco sours (\$7), a concoction of grape liqueur, lime juice, sugar, egg whites and bitters. South Americans so revere this drink that it's actually caused a dispute between Chile and Peru, which both claim to have created it. Centro's version is smooth and not too sweet.

As for the restaurant's service, it's excellent. True, sometimes the place gets so busy it's difficult to get a bartender's attention. But once you're seated, you can be assured of good service. The staff is concerned with getting the dishes right. And when a server makes a mistake, he or she is quick to remedy it. On my second visit, when my leftovers disappeared after I'd asked them to be packed up,

Food ★★★
Service ★★★
Ambience ★★★½
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IF YOU GO

950 Pearl St., Boulder |
303-442-7771 or
www.centrolatinlitchen.com.
Hours: Monday-Friday, 11:30 a.m.-10 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 11:30 a.m.-11 p.m.; Happy hour, Monday-Saturday, 3:30-5:30 p.m. Live music Sunday afternoons. No reservations. Moderately kid friendly. All major credit cards except Discover. Wheelchair accessible. Vegetarian entrées. Noise level: Loud. Recommended dishes: Chile relleno, avocado salsa, chimichurri mussel cazuela, burrito, burnt mango and lime pie.

our waiter offered to have the chefs cook half of a new entrée for me. When I declined, he comped the desserts on our bill.

In short, Centro's cuisine and fun atmosphere make it feel authentically Latin. And regardless of whether you visit the restaurant for drinks, dinner or both, Centro offers something enticing to suit your needs.

Contact Camera Dining Critic Meg Tilton at boulderdining@gmail.com.