

EPICUREAN ESSENCE

CENTRO

LATIN KITCHEN & REFRESHMENT PALACE

By REBECCA COLE

It's not every day that an owner decides to close down a profitable restaurant and spend "tons of dough" to completely retool everything, from the menu and décor to the staff and beverages. For Dave Query, Centro's owner (part of his Big Red F Restaurant Group), doing just this was a no-brainer.

"Rhumba was definitely fun, but it was just too much of a bar for us," said Query. "Some people might call it stupid to close a successful business and redo it, but we're a restaurant company, not a bar place. And now it has the opportunity to really shine as one of Boulder's great new restaurants."

When Query began asking people, "When was the last time you had dinner at Rhumba?" and they scratched their heads, he knew he had to make some changes. And while his other restaurant just three doors down, Jax Fish House, had a wait every night, "you could shoot a cannon off in here in the wintertime" Query said about Rhumba. So Query decided to change the entire concept.

"It was like sending a restaurant to rehab," Query said. "We really wanted to keep all the beautiful qualities that Rhumba had, just change the bad habits. We purposely didn't mess with the bar, so people would still have what they loved. And, it doesn't get any better than this location; to not have a great restaurant here, it's criminal."

kind of an Indian bent," said Query. "Although now, 'Centro' is in that same one-word vein — my kids really wanted Baba Yoyo."

With unfussy, affordably priced offerings (nothing is more than \$10 for lunch or \$14 for dinner), the new menu reflects Query's focus on serving top-notch, delicious, yet casual food. Developed with a big nod towards Mexico, Query said he plans to evolve the menu over time to introduce different and more classic Latin American food.

Patrons can mix-and-match their lunch order, choosing from small plates like chips and homemade avocado salsa with big chunks of ripe avocado, chopped tomatoes and red onions, cilantro and lime and wild mushroom quesadillas with poblano crema.

Sides include fried eggs (served very prettily on top of green tomatillo and red sauce), potato and chorizo hash (on the greasy side but, it is hash) and baked yams drizzled with lime and honey.

Big plates include roasted pork adobo, chile glazed tofu, tacos (of course), braised beef in barbacoa, garlicky shrimp, or chicken with pumpkin seed sauce; or blue crab and chicken adobo tortas (sandwiches) served with sweet potato fries.

Dinner has the same easy feel. With options similar to the lunch menu, dinner choices add entrée-sized portions of classic Mexican fare. Try the seafood and potato enchilada suiza — tilapia in corn tortillas, smothered with a light green chile and cheese sauce; the day-long roasted

chicken in sweet mole; or the burrito — the best bang for your buck with chicken, shrimp, chorizo, wild mushrooms, cheese and green chilies. Top it with a fried egg.

"To me, this food is really soulful," Query said. "I wanted it to be very simple, not something with 47 ingredients and a glossary in the back of the menu."

The patio, always a favorite in the summer, is now complimented by an updated interior with warm, inviting red and orange walls, black cozy banquettes, modern lighting and stark black-and-white photographs. The open kitchen has been moved back, making the

front section uncluttered and appealing. With live music every Sunday afternoon, the front tables are easily removed and the place transforms into a salsa dance hall.

It's not easy to pull off a seemingly simple, casual restaurant without falling into the bad habits Query freely admits happened at Rhumba. The secret is obviously in the details. Everything from the décor to the revamped bar menu to the new ice cubes was carefully planned and thought out.

Query hired Jim Meehan from Manhattan's Gramercy Tavern to teach all his bar mangers how to approach their work like a chef, bartending as a craft or profession rather than a college job. And, Query changed the bar menu at Centro to include handcrafted drinks; no longer muddled with sugar and mint, their updated, elegant mojito is infused — now you can smile without fear of a leaf in your teeth.

"We're taking a whole new approach about quality and freshness of ingredients," Query said. "We're squeezing all of our juices now, and our bar managers are going to the farmers' market with the chef in the morning for local fruit infusions."

Query is really excited about the ice cubes. Bigger than your average cube, they won't melt or dilute your drink no matter how long you nurse it on the hot patio.

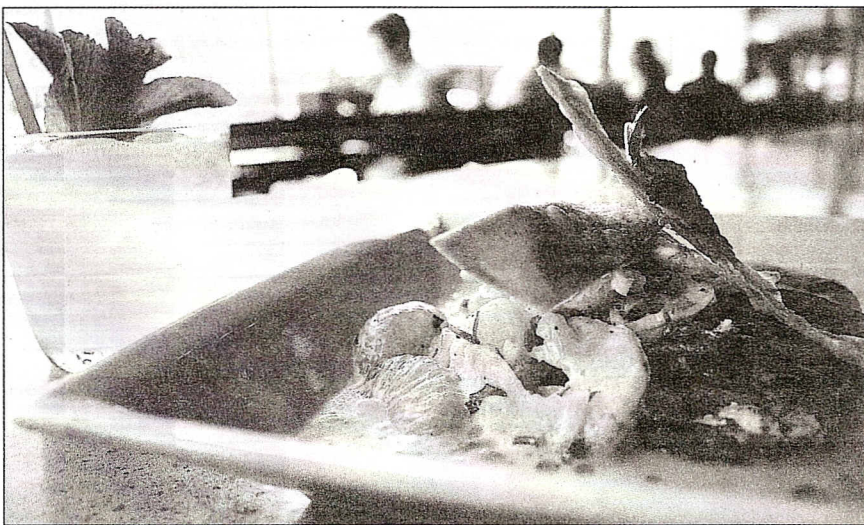
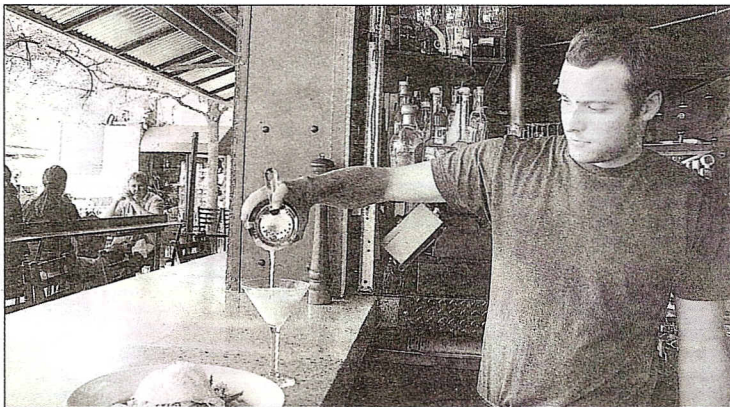
"That goes against every cost savings rule in the world, because you want to let the ice melt and stretch your drink," Query said.

Query is one of the original restaurateurs in Boulder with successes including Lick Skillet Café in Gold Hill and Q's at the Boulderado, although it seems that newer, trendier owners have been garnering a lot more attention in the national press recently.

Query is humble about his contributions, throwing out props to many other local restaurants and to the nature of Boulder itself.

"It's a privilege to do business here. I have the greatest job in the world," he said. "But I don't think it's as much as what I did as it is what Boulder has to offer. Boulder's always been on the culinary map. But I do love it those guys are getting the press, because it's bringing the national spotlight to Boulder. Us little guys, we get the crumbs, we all benefit from it."

Visit Centro Latin Kitchen and Refreshment Palace at 950 Pearl St., 303-442-7771, www.rhumbarestaurant.com.



Top: Graham Ferrara pours a pisco sour to accompany the burrito with chorizo, shrimp, chicken, mushrooms, green chile and a fried egg on top.

Above: The shrimp ceviche with mango and grilled tomatoes with a mojito.

Photos by Zak Wood.

Now reborn as Centro Latin Kitchen & Refreshment Palace, the restaurant has undergone a sophisticated renovation but still retains its fun, laidback approach to dining. Take, for instance, the name. What exactly is a "Latin Kitchen & Refreshment Palace"? And why, when you say it, do you want to snap your fingers in that zigzag motion: snap, snap, snap!

"Everything that has opened up recently is very serious — Frasca, Tahona, Radda. The name was part of not taking it so seriously, to just have fun and keep it light. It was originally going to be called Baba Yoyo, but that had