

Real Genius

Centro Latin Kitchen & Refreshment Palace
950 Pearl Street, Boulder
303-442-7771
www.centrolatinkitchen.com
Hours; lunch 11:30 a.m.-4 p.m. daily; dinner 4 p.m.-close daily

A few months ago, the awkwardly named **Centro Latin Kitchen & Refreshment Palace** rose up, phoenix-like, from the ashes of La Rhumba — Dave Query's failed attempt at Caribbean-Asian fusion, a place

BY
**JASON
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I loathed with a fine, hot passion — and further fortified the multi-unit owner's entrenchment on this hard-fought block of Boulder's Pearl Street. Query has three houses

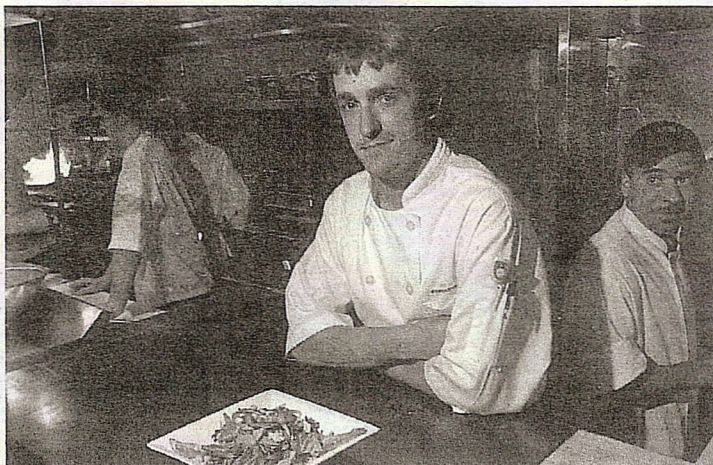
within 500 feet on one side of the block (Centro, Jax and the West End Tavern) facing off against half a dozen restaurants on the other side, all scrabbling for space and customers. They're fighting for tourist dollars, student dollars and local dollars, for trust-fund money and working-stiff money.

As La Rhumba, this busy space was an object lesson bearing out the long-held restaurant theory that dumb hippies will eat (and drink) anywhere there's a jam band playing. But as Centro Taqueria & Pleasure Dome, it's much more. It's a statement about how far Colorado has come along the curve toward food-world respectability, a digression on all the uppity modern Mexican/nouvelle Latino prattle that has dominated culinary conversation for years, the arguments of authenticity versus modernity, tradition versus translation. I believe it's very close to the ideal expression of a quote/unquote Colorado cuisine — and, as such, is cause for me to eat some of my words. Query is not the dimwitted, trend-humping, shoemaking hack I once thought he was.

He is, in fact, a fucking genius.

Like beer, like ice cream, like truffles, the pig is proof on the hoof — evidence that the food gods love us and want us to be happy. And the masa cake (or “cheesy smoked pork belly masa cake,” as the menu calls it) at Centro Eat Place & Beverage Wonderland is proof that not only is Query in league with the food gods, but he's also the beneficiary of long, intimate and frequent conversations with those little deities that oversee the day-to-day ops of the restaurant industry and bring luck to their favored disciples.

Essentially, this masa cake is an arepa — the favored street food and midnight snack of all the party people who live in those funny-shaped countries *sur de la frontera*. By themselves, arepas are good. Arepas dipped in crema or chile sauce, arepas smothered in cheese or filled with stuff, are even better. And a sweet-corn masa cake gummed up with cheese, speckled with jalapeño and studded with brunoise-cut smoked pork belly is indescribably excellent — the kind of dish you want to eat slow so it lasts, eat fast because it is so amazing, eat three of in a row and every day for a week.



Ian Clark is at the center of the action at Centro Latin Kitchen.

It is the kind of dish that, all alone, can define a menu, a style, an entire parenthetical cuisine — too rough and sloppy to be fine dining, too exactly prepped to be rustic, too everything to be anything other than singular and incomparable. And it would be enough if the masa cake were the only item on Centro's menu to rise to this level of intelligent, deliberate and utterly original design, but it's not. It's just the beginning.

Also coming from exec Ian Clark's kitchen is a made-to-order avocado salsa (an overdone gimmick, but tasty), a salad with a burnt-orange vinaigrette that tastes like what I imagine that Orange Glo infomercial guy's house would smell like if it were on fire, and a simple lobster broth that arrives in a plain earthenware bowl full of nothing but a muddy brownish liquid and a few floating vegetables. Upon closer examination, however, this dish reveals a depth of technique and thought that is staggering. The most surprising thing is not that it's delicious — although it is — and not that, after ten minutes or so, the steeping, sliced raw poblano chiles step up and turn the soup into a blazing hell-broth as spicy as liquid fire. The most surprising thing is that nowhere else on the menu does lobster appear. Which means that Query, Clark and crew are bringing in lobsters (small ones, probably, but still...) solely to construct one ugly seven-dollar soup on the appetizer menu. At first I thought maybe they were just buying up shells to roast and simmer for stock and then adding a little canned or frozen lobster meat to the bottom of each bowl, but one taste puts the lie to this theory. The little pieces of lobster meat at the bottom of each bowl are too uniformly cut, too perfectly cooked (still stiff and a little squeaky on the teeth even after being poached in hot soup) to be anything but fresh, and the lobster flavor in the stock is too powerful to have been created without the inclusion of tomalley, brains, maybe roe.

As much as the masa cake demonstrates the brilliance and pure, joyous abandon of Centro's kitchen, the lobster broth shows the talent and rigorous, completely uncompromising mentality resident there. Sea bugs are expensive little fuckers; making a

strong fumet or a stock out of fish racks or lobster shells is a masters'-level dissertation on galley mechanics, an über-classical bit of prep magic that most chefs do once or twice at C-school and then never again. You know who loved fumets? Escoffier. And Escoffier was nuts for doing (or making his cooks do) the nearly impossible several times before breakfast.

But since Centro Pork Palace & Saloon isn't open for breakfast, this kitchen just hikes up its Chefwear and does the nearly impossible several times before lunch. For instance, it does a pulled-chicken and yam hash with chorizo and a fried egg with green chile poured over the top: five or six cultures in one plate, a Latino sloppy joe that looks a mess but is actually the calculatingly jumbled final product of three different iconic recipes and maybe a half-dozen exacting preparations. Also, it tastes good. *Really* good. And it cures hangovers.

The seafood-and-potato enchilada is like the best fisherman's stew you've ever had wrapped up inside a tortilla — obsessively fresh, perfectly balanced and napped with a green sauce that is how a Frenchman might make green chile going only from someone's second-hand description: “I don't know, Claude. Ees green and smooth, no? Creamy somewhat, spicy a little, made of the chile pepper and the cilantro...”

The barbecue beef tacos are served deconstructed on a huge plate with a pile of beef half the size of my head and a chorizo-and-potato hash that's completely different from the hash made with the pulled chicken. The beef itself is about halfway between a great desebrada and the best example of the worst style of barbecue in America: Texas-style beef. That said, I would gladly box up some of Centro's and drive it down to Texas myself to put it up against that state's best, confident that it would hold its own.

The excellent “garlicky griddled shrimp” tacos are served with “spicy lemon stuff” (a perfect description), and

the red-chile pork tacos come with a whole honey-and-lime-spiked roasted yam that is wonderful on its own, even if occasionally burned beyond recognition. The pork here is a different prep from the green-chile pork used for the pork torta on the entree section of the menu. That torta, although no great shakes, is far superior to the blue crab and avocado salad version — which is sour, mushy, speckled with chopped celery and served on a grilled baguette that's cut and stacked and spiked like a whole big tower of nasty. The traditional torta has a very specific design: It's a big, messy sandwich served on grilled, lardy Cuban or Mexican bread. By substituting the baguette in this ill-conceived translation, the kitchen lets taste take a back seat to looks and dramatic presentation. Still, the fries that come with it are fantastic — hand-cut steak fries, done like frites and sprinkled with sea salt.

Centro Mexicali Café & Liquor Barn offers butter beans rather than refritos as a side (which is cool, because I love butter beans and because no one else ever offers butter beans) and ears of sweet corn served dipped in chile sauce and garnished with shredded cotija and piñon, of all things. And for dessert, there are churros with goat's-milk cajeta — which finally come as close as any I've tasted in five years to the ones I remember eating on the street in Mexico.

All of this is served in the oddly shaped dining room that hugs the long bar inside, or on two patios that are almost always full — usually with a line of people waiting outside, as well. Sometimes there's live music, sometimes there's not. Fact is, though, I would eat this stuff sitting on an overturned peach crate in the middle of Pearl Street. I would eat it in my own living room every night if I could just find the right group of guys to throw in with me on my plan to kidnap Query, keep him in my garage and force him to make me masa cakes and seafood enchiladas whenever I want them. I don't

care how Centro looks — although it does look good. My only concern is that the servers keep bringing the food — which they do, in great volume and, for the most part, quickly. And when the service is overwhelmed by the crowd, the cooks deliver their own plates to

tables, which is pretty cool, too.

But ultimately, the food at Centro is all that matters, because it's so good, so smart, so original and so stubbornly uncompromising. I come here when I'm sad, and the food (not the flute music, not the plates, not the freaky art on the walls) makes me happy. I come here when I'm already happy, and it just makes me happier. I come here because, right now, this week, *today*, Centro Latin Kitchen & Refreshment Palace is my favorite restaurant in the area.

Which is really saying something for a place standing on the bones of one of my least favorite restaurants in the world.

Centro Latin Kitchen & Refreshment Palace	
Masa cake	\$7
Lobster broth	\$7
Tacos	\$10
Chicken hash	\$12
Seafood enchilada	\$14
Tortas	\$9

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