

New restaurants serve opposites

Zapata lacks flare, service and decor

By J.J. Harder

Senior editor

Apparently, the new Mexican restaurant Zapata derives its appellation from a family name. But if my Spanish 201 knowledge serves me correctly, it should mean "female shoe." Fitting, because this place is about as worthless to me as a female shoe.

Zapata took the place of Bongo, Lincoln's then-only Colombian restaurant, which wasn't half bad. So while the region of the cuisine moved north, the restaurant itself went south.

Zapata should have a lot going for it: a location in the thriving Haymarket district and dancing on weekends. Let me stress the "should" in that last sentence.

My Zapata experience started not just on the wrong foot, but on a foot that was obviously lodged up someone's posterior when aesthetic decisions were made.

I was overtaken by the innumerable piñatas that were strung throughout the restaurant. If they had been authentic, I wouldn't have minded, but these were the \$9.95 kind that were probably bought at last year's K-Mart Cinco De Mayo clearance sale.

And I'm pretty sure the sombrero-to-person ratio was disproportionate in violation of state and federal hat laws.

And even if the décor could have been championed by a better interior designer, I still would have been overloaded by its stupidity.

There were three different programs tuned in on the televisions: one featured figure skating, another women's basketball and the third was on the Lifetime channel. I don't know what the manager was thinking, but no establishment open on Friday night should have "Not Without My Daughter" on the big screen.

Just when I thought it couldn't get any worse, the Mariachi band came out. Their harmonies were stellar, their finger-picking extraordinary, but their outfits killed me. Metallic sequins don't belong on any item of clothing — prom dress, garter belt or especially Mariachi shirt. I felt like I was at a disco ball manufacturers' convention.

To add to the atmosphere of women's television, piñata overload and disco Mariachi were servers that were trying a little too hard to appear attractive.

One waitress sported a dangerously short skirt, another only buttoned one shirt button and the others followed suit, showing as much skin in as many different areas as possible. One word: gross.

All this was before I was even waited on, so when the waitress arrived, I was looking for some positive comments.

Unfortunately, I was unable to find any. The appetizer was slow to arrive, the napkins were delivered

only after asking for them three times and the silverware didn't come until after our meal was getting cold.

The food itself would classify Zapata as the worst of Lincoln, with-

Zapata

REVIEW

WHAT: Mexican

WHERE: 815 O

PRICES: \$8 - 20

FIVE WORDS: P

out help from the service and atmosphere. The quesadillas were greasier than the pit in a Jiffy Lube.

Rice, one of the staples of the cuisine, was dry, bitter and generally not tasteful. The beans were so watery they consumed the rest of my plate.

And a note to the owners of Zapata: I could tell the tortillas were frozen. I know you and the Schwann's man were trying to pull a fast one on me, but I caught you with your hand in the truck.

To top the whole night off, it took the waitress a solid 25 minutes to get the check after the eating was done. Then, after handing me the Discover Card folder, she told me they didn't even take Discover. Perfect.

Then I got the "Are you gonna stay around for some salsa dancing?" Seriously.

The fajitas were large, and the menu was interesting (cow brains, tongue, intestines and octopus), but these pluses weren't enough to get even a neutral rating. This place was horrible. I would rather eat a half-eaten TV dinner at home than ever go back.

Now that I think about it, a female shoe would do me a lot more good than another trip to Zapata.



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El Chaparro offers authentic cuisine

By J.J. Harder

Senior editor

El Chaparro doesn't have a lot going for it — it's in the worst part of town, the ambiance is non-existent and the food is only adequate.

But I still like it.

The new Mexican restaurant is located in the building previously occupied by El Charro — don't get confused, they're completely different restaurants.

El Chaparro is basically a small square dining room with white walls and basic booths. The eatery gains its charm through solid service.

The chips in salsa are on the table before you have a chance to ask for them. And they aren't like Taco Bell nachos — these are authentic tortilla chips served with a liquid, non-chunky sauce. Your order will probably be there just about as quickly.

Be ready to either speak some Spanish to order or use the numbers given to each menu item (a tell-tale sign a language barrier is in effect).

I wouldn't try to special order — it's unlikely that you'll get rice substituted for beans (it didn't work for me). But that, too, is part of the personality of the place.

El Chaparro offers more than 20 entrees, including five different egg dishes that are house favorites. The enchiladas were good but very small. The chicken inside was somewhat dry, but all the other ingredients were fresh.

The tamales were also

REVIEW El Chaparro

WHAT: Mexican food

WHERE: 900 S. 13th, (13th & F)

PRICES: \$5 - 10 per meal

FIVE WORDS: Adequate food, quirky and remote.

small but very bland. In general, the portions were small, but the prices are relatively inexpensive.

This place is cool because of its little quirks, such as ordering in Spanish.

For example, the soft tacos are open-faced mini-tortillas that are, for lack of a better word, cute. And enjoy the real Mexican music on the radio (i.e., not Ricky Martin or Enrique Iglesias).

Try a Jarritos, a brand of fruity soft drink popular in Mexico and available at El Chaparro. The personality of El Chaparro goes a long way.

This definitely isn't the best Mexican in town. In fact, I wouldn't even put it in the top three. But if you want to go somewhere that's quirky and out of the way, El Chaparro is your place.