



» El Nuevo Mexicano
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dessert of fried cinnamon coated plantains surrounding a dollop of vegan coconut ice cream. Need I say more?

Less than a week later, I sat down with Rodriguez and sampled more items on the menu. She chose two items off their regular vegan menu, the Enchiladas de Chorizo, Papa y Zanahoria en Salsa Tomatillo (\$12) and Flautas de Verduras con Papa y Chorizo Vegano (\$12), and an item off their special menu, Chiles Rellenos con Vegetales y Frutas (\$14). These three dishes all arrived on separate plates, attractively nestled in their distinct sauces. My mouth began to water immediately and by the end, my Midwestern taste buds had met their match.

The flautas were my favorite, which I sheepishly admitted might be because they were fried and crispy. The chipotle and tomatillo salsa, flavorful with only a slight kick, provided the perfect compliment to the sweet and savory ingredients. The enchiladas with potatoes, carrots, Daiya cheese and Upton's chorizo rested in a green tomatillo salsa, was a great subtle dish. The chiles rellenos took the kick to a different level, with the tasty poblano peppers deliciously mixed with mango, raisins, peppers and plantains. While I threw up my hands in surrender to the spice, I'm sure heartier spice-lovers would make this excellent dish a favorite. It may not be on the menu when you come because the special menu rotates every month, but you won't be disappointed with the other options.

All these dishes can be accompanied with white rice or quinoa. The quinoa comes Spanish-style—a gorgeous orange, blended with tomatoes and chipotle. When I asked Rodriguez what the reception has been to this new menu, she said, "Our patrons were really happy.... Now that we made the switch, so many people are so vocal on Facebook.... That was the biggest surprise. The vegan patrons are very vocal and very grateful."

It's been years since I sat down to an authentic Mexican meal where I felt confident in the vegan ingredients. After only one visit, El Nuevo Mexicano topped my list of favorite restaurants. After two visits, I began to spread the word like a convert.

Whether you consider yourself a conscious omnivore, vegetarian or vegan, support the creativity of this wonderful neighborhood restaurant.

Maureen Ewing is on staff at Mindful Metropolis.

El Nuevo Mexicano

Now open for vegans

BY MAUREEN EWING

When thinking of restaurants that can accommodate both carnivorous and vegan diets, Mexican food rarely comes to mind due to its use of animal stock and lard.

Well, vegans can rejoice at the fantastic Especiales Vegano menu at El Nuevo Mexicano. This Lakeview restaurant has been a neighborhood favorite for over 30 years, but created a special vegan menu this spring to accommodate its many vegan guests. Owner Maria Rodriguez began her journey as a restaurant owner seven years ago after her uncle died. Over the past seven years, she's revamped the restaurant, and the menu, making it healthier for all her patrons.

This past February, after coming across Mercy for Animals at an event, she began her own journey to eating a more healthy and compassionate diet. With the help of Kenny Torrella and other Mercy for Animals staff, Rodriguez created a special vegan menu, adding Daiya cheese and Upton's chorizo—substitutes that receive rave reviews from her vegan customers. She trained her kitchen staff in the preparation of vegan dishes, so that they use designated spaces and grills. She also worked to keep the dishes as authentic to the flavors

and traditions as possible.

Rodriguez began to question every aspect of her business.

"We switched our tortillas so they have absolutely no preservatives in them," she says. "Everywhere I can easily switch, that's what I'm doing." In addition to creating a vegan menu, she also changed her suppliers in order to purchase sustainable meats, such as free-range chicken. Rodriguez says, "We want to know where our ingredients come from, and I started asking questions. I was driving everyone crazy!" Conscious omnivores and vegans alike can feel good about the food they will devour at El Nuevo Mexicano.

I visited El Nuevo Mexicano on my birthday with my boyfriend and we enjoyed their popular margaritas, which happened to be on special (\$18 pitcher) that evening. Having resisted appetizers to save room for dessert, we both ordered the Chimichangas Vegano (\$12), tortillas stuffed with Upton's chorizo, mangos, peppers, onions, plantains, almonds and dried cranberries. The fresh ingredients partnered with the tangy salsa, light spring salad and roasted yams surprised me with its gorgeous flavor combination. Then, dessert: Platanos Fritos con Nieve Vegano (\$6). A vegan dream