

dining

Sandoval strikes gold again with upscale Mexican

The bar at La Sandia was thronged with imbibers. Tequilas, several of them poured into tiny, triangular glass vases positioned vertically on some sort of zigzag contraption designed to make you jerk your head in curiosity, were clearly loosening the lips of the women whose vampy dialogue was straight out of *Sex and the City*.

Had I not been so smitten with my **corn soup** (\$7) — a rich purée of roasted corn swiped with a vinaigrette flavored with the black funk of *huitlacoche*, a prized fungus that grows on corn kernels — I would have moved closer to them, as their conversation was becoming more audacious by the minute.

Then the duo of **ceviches** (\$12) arrived, and my fascination with their musings on men, fashion, bedroom theatrics and tawdry gossip became inconsequential. My attention had been diverted to the two white, square plates in front of me. The first featured rock shrimp bolstered by the punch of pungent chiles, followed by the tartness of lime and tomatoes, the sweetness of onions and the distinct taste of cilantro; the second a scattering of translucent cubes of yellowfin tuna puddled in a tart tomatillo broth spiked with poblano peppers and bright with fresh oranges, specks of cilantro and wedges of tomato. Both were beautifully good.

The heart and soul of these dishes comes from Richard Sandoval, whose federation of contemporary Mexican and Latin restaurants spans the globe. He has restaurants in New York; San Francisco; Las Vegas; Washington, D.C.; Dubai; Mexico; and, of course, Denver, where he opened Tamayo in 2001, Zengo in 2004 and the original La Sandia, Northfield Stapleton, in 2006.

Sandoval spent his youth in Mexico City, fueled by the vibrant food of that vast metropolis. By the time he was 12, he was cooking in the kitchens of his father's restaurants, a boyhood obsession that eventually led him to California, where he attended the Culinary Institute of America before returning to his homeland, where he was ultimately crowned the national *toque d'oro* — chef of the year.

He jetted off to New York, opening a pair of French restaurants before sweeping Manhattan by storm with the unveiling of Maya, his flagship restaurant that celebrates the food of his native Mexico.

La Sandia — Spanish for *watermelon* — similarly embraces Sandoval's passion for sophisticated south-of-the-border food.

This is a beautiful restaurant, embellished with kaleidoscopic stained-glass panels, walls shaded

La Sandia

- **Grade:** B
- **Address:** 8419 Park Meadows Center Drive, in The Vistas at Park Meadows
- **Hours:** 11 a.m. to close daily
- **Food:** Latin/modern Mexican
- **How much:** \$7-\$15 starters, soups and salads, \$12.50-\$24 main dishes
- **Reservations:** highly recommended on weekends
- **Noise:** crushing when it's full
- **Information:** 303-586-5511, modernmexican.com/lasandiapm
- **Parking:** validated valet or lot parking throughout the mall complex

in Popsicle hues, vast windows that look to the Rocky Mountains, dark woods, rustic tin-star lanterns and a sweeping staircase that ascends to a rooftop patio. It feels festive and riotous — and it is.

It's easy to gawk, which is what people do in a restaurant like this. They also drop their jaws when the server arrives at their table balancing a lava-stone *mofcájeté*, which holds the ingredients for the **guacamole** (\$8.50) to be prepared table-side. It's up to you to decide how spicy you want it; the rest is left to the mashing director, who ceremoniously mixes the chiles with avocado, onions, cilantro, lime juice and tomatoes until he's achieved the ideal balance between creamy and chunky.

The **queso fundido** (\$8.50), a blend of Mexican cheeses bubbling in a cast iron skillet, is another winner — at least for the 60 seconds that it's hot. But like most quesos, once the temperature cools, the cheese hardens to the durability of a brick.

I'd forgo the **alambre tacos** (\$15.50), too. The essential elements are there — melted Oaxacan cheese, ropes of beef and bites of bacon thrust into corn tortillas — but the flavors are a bore, and so is the *salsa roja* that comes on the side.

Better are the **tacos al pastor** (\$12.50), with their tender knobs of marinated pork, strands of onions, charred bits of fresh pineapple and side of tomatillo salsa. They won't transport you to the rusty streets of the *Distrito Federal*, but they're satisfying.

And I liked both the **duck enchiladas** (\$17) draped in a complex mole darker than espresso beans and punctuated with notes of cinnamon, cumin, cloves, chocolate and chiles, and the **chicken mole** (\$16.50), a grilled breast cloaked in the same sauce and accompanied by fried plantains.

The vibrantly seasoned **carne asada** (\$19.50), sliced and lined up like dominoes on a plate and served with sautéed onions and poblano peppers, chimichurri and a faintly smoky *morita* chile salsa, was further proof that you can eat extremely well at La Sandia.

You can drink well, too. The **orange margarita** (\$8), infused with serrano peppers and squeezed with fresh citrus juices, was wonderful. That said, the next time I'm at La Sandia and spot a group of women whooping it up with tequila tasters, I'm joining the party.

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Dish about dining

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