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Casa Navarro

Food ★★★

Service ★★½

Atmosphere ★★½

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If ever there was a restaurant that spoke Tex-Mex, it was El Taxco, a fixture at McKinney and St. Paul in downtown Dallas for 40 years.

El Taxco meant hot sauce with the emphasis on *hot*. Enchiladas with wonderful chili gravy. Nachos piled so high with cheese and sour cream and guacamole that the tortilla chips disappeared from view.

Even after financial difficulties in the '80s, the restaurant hung on three more years up the way on Harry Hines.

Then, nothing.

Until Casa Navarro.

Call it Daughter of El Taxco.

Opened in a matchbox space at Marsh and Forest Lane, Casa Navarro is run with no-nonsense earnestness by Blanca Navarro, widow of Joe Navarro, whose father founded El Taxco in 1947. Joe and Blanca ran the restaurant from 1974 to 1987.

Beneath sepia blowups of photos from the Mexican revolution, Spanish and English mingle as easily as salsa and cilantro.

For El Taxco fans, it's almost like coming home, starting with the *hot* sauce and chips. But the warming complimentary bowl of bean soup is a new extra.

You forget that these old style nachos – both Joe's and Blanca's are on the menu – are a meal in themselves. An assorted half-order is an overwhelming plateful studded with great gobs of guacamole, Cheddar and sour cream

with jalapenos on the side. Beneath this are various combinations of chicken, beans and beef. Also offered: fajita nachos – flour tortilla triangles folded around skirt steak and grilled peppers and onions.

There are several dozen lunch specials, but who could resist the nostalgia-Mex of El Taxco plate dinner with a fresh chewy corn tortilla rolled into a cheese enchilada smothered in chili gravy and a cheese taco draped with light-colored cheese sauce? The taco shell is fresh-fried, if greasy, and stuffed with beef, lettuce, tomato and cheese. And the refried beans have that deep, almost sour undertaste.

The Navarro special has the same cheese enchilada and a beef enchilada smothered in gravy, a cheese enchilada with thin ranchera sauce, rice and beans. A chicken flauta also was fresh-fried, with more dabs of sour cream, guacamole and cheese.

Other selections range from carne asada and snapper *veracruzano* to shrimp enchiladas and spinach enchiladas. There is breakfast daily and weekend soups, such as menudo.

But how did I miss the sopapillas at El Taxco, if indeed they were served there? Round and fluffy with a dusting of sugar, they are simply exquisite, the best in memory.

Casa Navarro's staff had better get its sea legs fast, as this part of town is hungry for good Mexican and word is already getting out. Any bets on how long it will take before it has to expand?