

214-941-4050. Closed Mon. Other location: 1601 McKinney. 214-747-1121. Multiple other locations: \$ to \$\$, 1/03. – K.E.H.

**EL MARIACHI MEXICAN RESTAURANT (★★½)** Cheerful family-oriented restaurant offers Tex-Mex that is a cut above. Fine El Mariachi special nachos, generously piled high, w fajita-quality beef & chicken. Good guacamole, chile rellenos & house specialty *el molcajete* (chicken, beef & sausage in highly spiced sauce). Full bar. 531 E Belt Line, Cedar Hill. 972-291-9700. \$\$, 5/03. – D.R.

**EI MERCADO COCINA MEXICANA (★★★)** Bustling, cheery cafe is in a corner of Dallas Farmers Market. There's a fresh stamp on Tex-Mex, & menu offers intriguing entrees from across Mexico. Pork fajitas are very savory. Liquor license pending. 920 Pearl. 214-742-1740. B\*ast & lunch only. \$ to \$\$, 7/04. – M.P.

**ELOTE MEXICAN GRILL (★★½)** Tailor entrees from a vast array of tortillas, meats, veggies & so on. Cafeteria-style counter has authentic pork carnitas & barba-coa, trendier spinach & low-carb tortillas. Sunny decor. No alcohol. Closed Sun. 955 E. Campbell, Richardson. 214-575-2639. \$, 11/04. – W.S.

**EL PEDREGAL MEXICAN RESTAURANT (★★½)** Daily specials a real deal at pleasant neighborhood spot. Flavorful soups the best draw, incl *caldo de res* (beef-veggie) & *menudo* (tripe). BYOB. 3420 Broadway Blvd, Garland. 972-926-1106. Closed Mon. \$, 8/01. – D.G.

**EL PULPO (★★★)** Mexican seafood spot bursts w flavor. Namesake octopus dishes well-represented. Fine *queso fundido* & *snapper al mojo*. Inexpensive lunch specials. Colorful décor; quick & attentive service. Full bar. 4314 Live Oak. 214-823-7355. \$ to \$\$, 3/02. – W.S.

**EL RANCHITO CAFE AND CLUB (★★★)** Large authentic Mex-Mex & Tex-Mex menu. Very good *carne Tampiquena* (beef marinated in beer & cooked w bell peppers, tomatoes & onions). Top-notch combo dinners w tacos, enchiladas, rice & beans. Bright atmosphere. 610 W Jefferson. 214-946-4238. \$\$, 7/02. – E.H.

**EL TIBURON SEAFOOD AND GRILL (★★★)** Authentic Mexican-style seafood spot w dinner buffet or menu option. Off menu, we liked shrimp cocktail & ceviche tostada; excellent catfish fillet stuffed w shrimp. Full bar w mbrshp. 4115 W Jefferson, Cockrell Hill. 214-337-4779. \$ to \$\$, 9/01. – M.D.

**EL TIO JUAN (★★½)** Offers a good, fresh buffet, incl flautas, tacos & quesadillas. Also fragrant chicken & rich beef fajitas. Try the flan (w wonderful caramel sauce). Friendly & accommodating service. No alcohol. 315 Cedar Ridge, Duncanville. 972-780-5522. \$, 8/01. – L.C.

**ELY (★★★)** Mom-&pop gem gets it right, from chips & salsa to entrees such as shrimp chile relleno. Funky atmosphere. No alcohol. 11007 Lake June, Balch Springs. 972-216-9709. \$ to \$\$, 4/03. – M.G.

**ENCHILADA'S (★★★)** The sleek, chic Addison location is the crown jewel of this Tex-Mex mini-chain. The menu blends standards with a few signature dishes, such as the Fajitalada dinner: cheese and onion enchiladas topped with fajita meat. Stunningly stylish full bar. 5290 Belt Line (at Montfort), Addison. 972-759-0600. Multiple other locations. \$ to \$\$, 4/04. – K.H.

**ERNESTO'S (★★½)** Cheerful dining spot serves home-style Mexican food. Try queso, enchiladas, & our fave dish, *puntas* Monterrey. Quick & friendly service. 1202 NW Hwy, Garland. 972-681-8112. \$ to \$\$, 10/01. – K.H.

**FREEBIRDS WORLD BURRITO (★★★)** Neat & perfectly shaped burritos really are something special. Plenty of choices in size & flavors. College Station heritage adds popularity w Aggie crowd. Beer. 5500 Greenville at Lovers. 214-265-9992. \$ to \$\$, 7/03. – K.P.

**GARCIA BROTHERS MEXICAN GRILL (★★)** Family-owned Tex-Mex grill is a work in progress. Good bets: carnitas & salsa. Gracious service. BYOB. 1008 W Hebron, Carrollton. 972-394-6633. \$ to \$\$, 9/01. – T.D.

**HERRERA'S MEXICAN CAFE (★★★)** Food beats spotty service at offshoot of Tex-Mex institution. Crispy chips, fiery salsa & worthy bean soup served w entrees. Fresh guacamole & good fried jalapeño poppers. Huge combo platters. Excellent tacos *al carbon*. Full bar. 3790 Belt Line, Addison. 972-488-2202. Other locations: 4001 Maple. 214-528-9644. 5427 Denton. 214-630-2599. Closed Mon. 2853 W Illinois. 214-330-6426. Closed Tue. \$ to \$\$, 3/02. –T.E.

**IBARRA'S (★★½)** Serves good, filling basic Tex-Mex. Top entrée: Jesse's special (pork chops covered w ranchero sauce) & fine grilled shrimp & chicken mole. Attentive service; bright & clean. No alcohol. 3035 S Shiloh, Garland. 972-271-4116. Closed Sun. \$, 10/00. – R.R.

**IRON CACTUS (★★★)** Offshoot of Austin's popular tequila bar is positioned to bring a party atmosphere

# Rome wasn't built in a day

Achieving much in 3 years, Modo Mio owners take the Italian restaurant to a higher level

**GROWTH SPURT:** It's been three years since brothers Brett and

**UPDATE** Ryan Stallard took over Modo Mio, at that time,

one of Dallas' most authentic Italian restaurants. Today, Modo Mio surpasses the original. The food is better, and the wine list has grown impressively.

It's probably best to look past the "cucina rusticana" and "northern Italian" labels, though, and just consider that this is fairly representative Italian fare with a few American ringers (like the ubiquitous Caesar salad) thrown in for comfort.

Appetizers started on a high note with caramelized pear slices bedded on prosciutto di Parma (\$11), their sweet-salty flavors in perfect balance, but it wasn't necessary for the kitchen to trim all the fat off the meat. Carpaccio (\$11) layered strips of Parmigiano-Reggiano and peppery arugula leaves over rosy raw beef. You could scoop this onto fragrant, crusty slices of bread or eat it plain and just dip the bread into peppered olive oil.

**MANY KINDS, MANY WAYS:**

Pasta, both fresh house-made and dry imported, dominates the entrees. But the fresh fettuccine cradling one night's veal *osso buco* special (\$33.50) was a disappointment, ranging in doneness from tough to soft. Then, too, what to make of the sauce? One doesn't expect to find a tomato ragu on top of the veal shank. But it achieved such concentrated, rich and integrated flavors that shortcomings were easy to forgive. Maybe this dish just needs a new name.

Another special, mild-fleshed northern pike, was appropriately



Photos by DARNELL RENEE/Special Contributor

**Modo Mio shines with an authentically Italian menu and a strong wine list.**

matched with white-wine-lemon sauce (\$25.50) and sided with crisp-fried artichoke chunks,

bright steamed broccoli and ambrosial sautéed potato cubes, crisp on the outside and fluffy inside. Virtually everything we sampled showed restraint in seasoning so that the flavors of primary ingredients were the forward element.

**SWEETS SURRENDER:** Among the desserts, chocolate panna cotta

(\$6.50) was a dark but understated variation on the traditional custard, and Gorgonzola cheesecake (\$6.50) was a bold, savory way to finish a meal that called out for port or brandy.



**Veal Fontina (top) and Chilean sea bass pan-sautéed with white wine, lemon and capers**

Which brings us to the wine list. It manages to take the higher, riskier road of featuring many good Italian as well as California selections. No wonder it has won

several awards.

One of the house wines is Falesco Vitiano, a less-familiar but very drinkable and inexpensive Umbrian wine. In some cases, the wines are bargain-priced, as with the \$39 bottle of Palazzo della Torre from Allegri-Verona, an earthy blend of 70 percent corvina, 25 percent rondinella and 5 percent sangiovese. It was among many lower-end, reasonably priced bottles, and blends are noted on the list.

Service was perfectly competent, but nothing more. What could take this restaurant to the next level is some of that old-fashioned, Italian-style pride of ownership, where diners are treated less like customers and more like guests. It's almost as if you want the sunny camaraderie among the folks on the mural to spill down into the dining room, an ambitious request, but not an impossible one for this team.

*Kim Pierce*

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downtown. Grand selection of tequilas and stunning setting give the three-story restaurant a promising start, and there's plenty of room, with 1,000 seats for large parties. The menu is contemporary Texana cum Southwestern. Service can falter. 1520 Main (at Akard). 214-749-4766. \$ to \$\$, 6/04. – D.G.

**JAVIER'S (★★★)** High-end restaurant has been attracting diners w Mexico City cuisine for a quarter-century. Soups (black bean & *caldo Xochilitl*) steal the lime-

light. Interesting *cabrito* (baby goat) fajitas. Reservations recommended. Full bar. 4912 Cole. 214-521-4211. Dinner only. \$\$ to \$\$\$, 12/02. – K.H.

**J. MIGUEL'S CAFE AND CANTINA (★★★½)** Wide-ranging menu of Tex-Mex, mesquite-grilled items, burgers, seafood & more. Recommended dishes: huevos rancheros, chicken enchiladas, chicken breast sandwich, burritos & tacos. Helpful service. Full bar w Uncard. 9824 Lakeview Pkwy, Rowlett. 972-475-6141. \$

to \$\$, 6/01. – D.G.

**LA ADELITA (★★½)** Family-run spot w large menu. Stout salsa. Enjoyable tortilla soup, grilled shrimp & tacos al carbon. B;fast too. Good service; quirky setting. BYOB. 7630 Military Pkwy. 214-275-6119. \$ to \$\$, 7/01. – M.D.

**LA CALLE DOCE (★★★½)** Local Mexican seafood wave started here in '82; the well-kept space in an old house is still charming. Good starters: calamari *frito* &

beef fajita quesadillas. Cafe is noted for its ceviche. Good catfish fillets & *camarón relleno*, a shrimp- & crab-stuffed poblano pepper w chile con queso. Warm & friendly service. Full bar. 415 W 12th. 214-941-4304. Other location: 1925 Skillman. 214-824-9900. \$\$, 7/03. – W.S.

**LA CASCADA (★★★)** Fine, tasty Mexican fare incl

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