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Southwestern samples

Zolo Grill offers restaurant reliability

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Zolo Grill

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Back in 1994, pop stars Ace of Base zoomed to the top of the charts with their catchy number-one single,

"The Sign." That same year, new Southwestern cuisine's star was also rising, and Boulder's Zolo Grill opened its doors to customers seeking this cutting-edge regional fare. This new restaurant enabled diners to enjoy the skillful marriage of Native American and Mexican classics like tamales and green chile with Asian and European elements ranging from wasabi to beurre blanc.

Today, the members of Ace of Base are undoubtedly playing the Swedish equivalent of the county fair circuit, their once fashionable techno stylings having fallen by the wayside. In sharp contrast, Zolo appears to be as popular as ever and provides compelling evidence that new Southwestern cuisine has moved from the trendy to a firmly entrenched pillar of the dining community. Of course, serving up a top-shelf selection of potent margaritas probably hasn't hurt Zolo's popularity, either.

Zolo's location is both a blessing and a curse. Centrally located in the same retail block as McGuckin Hardware, it's easy to get to, but it lacks the charm of, say, the Pearl Street Mall. For example, while Zolo's patio is pleasant in itself, one can't ignore the fact that the main scenic feature is the parking lot. On the other hand, the tastefully modern interior's soothing earth tones effectively complement the vibrant colors that characterize the presentation of

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the food.

At a recent lunch, the starters were certainly cheerful reminders of the kitchen's melding of palette and palate. The tortilla chips paired with a \$3 bowl of Hatch chile salsa represented nearly every color of the rainbow, and the pureed dip was a dark scarlet shade that foreshadowed the deep flavor of the slightly smoky peppers. The made-to-order \$7 guacamole retained its status as perhaps the most reliable appetizer in town; it was a sublime showcase for the creamy and occasionally chunky richness of ripe avocado without the distractions of heavy-handed onion, citrus or cilantro flavors.

While the starters were uniformly excellent, the entrees presented more of a mixed bag. One friend was impressed by the generous portion of duck breast in her \$12 BBQ duck tacos. However, she did voice that the tender duck had a slight game taste that she was unaccustomed to, although the sweet spiciness of the accompanying mango habanero salsa helped neutralize this flavor.

Not in the mood for a salad or the \$13 mushroom spinach tostada, a vegetarian friend ordered the \$8 Poblano chile relleno. Thanks to the addition of a delightfully complex ancho chile mole sauce, this was a much more sophisticated interpretation than what you find on a typical combination plate. Adding a side of rice, my friend noted, would transform this appetizer into a satisfyingly full-fledged meal.

Another friend sampled a combination plate standard, the \$12 chicken enchiladas. Topped with gouda in addition to the more prosaic cheddar and jack cheeses, this entree of chicken breasts came with chile, rice and beans. Despite these embellishments, the enchiladas themselves were a bit dry.

My plate of \$10 wild boar tamales was a solid pick. I've had less-than-satisfactory experiences eating this meat in the past, but in this case, it was pleasantly free of gamey flavor, and impossible to distinguish from high-quality pork produced by a purveyor such as Niman Ranch. My only minor quibble is that the cornmeal in one tamale was a bit grainy, bordering on the dry. But a generous pile of shredded pork on top of the tamale added welcome moisture and flavor.

Even just a few years ago, diners would likely consider Zolo's entrees to be an adventure in dining. Today, this fare has evolved into the familiar, bordering on comfort food. Although Zolo may no longer offer up any surprises, it has matured into a restaurant that can count reliability as one of its chief virtues. If you're seeking flavorful Southwestern classics at a fair price, this restaurant will not disappoint. And while the hapless musicians of Ace of Base have been consigned to the where-are-they-now roster, Zolo Grill has escaped this fate, successfully transforming itself from the darling of the moment into a proven standby.

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