

**Dining**

WHAT'S COOKING AROUND TAMPA BAY



Estela Jorgensen and her husband, Scott, manage Estela's, a Mexican restaurant known for its traditional dishes and hearty portions made from family recipes.

**Savoring true Mexican flavors**

■ Estela's serves real homemade Mexican cuisine with earthy, deep sauces.

By CHRIS SHERMAN  
Times Food and Wine Critic

**T**he boulevard of chain outlets and big box stores seems about as far as you can get from a Mexican village. The tranquil Ozzie-and-Harriet mini downtown of Tampa's Davis Islands and its low-key restaurant row seem even farther from Old Mexico.

Yet you can find the earthy taste, vital colors and charming accents of Latin America in both places thanks to the taste and energy of Estela Jorgensen, a vibrant entrepreneur from Guatemala.

While there's no shortage of Mexican food around Tampa Bay, most is the assembly-line formula of meat plus salsa plus cheese plus more cheese plus tortilla (flat, rolled or folded) with a margarita or Corona and a squeeze of theme.

In weak moments, even chain Mexican food meets the Nibbler's needs, but I usually crave truer country food. The Nibbler is thankful there are a few places here that make Mexican food the old-fashioned way.

Estela's is one of those, or rather two of them, now that she has expanded from Davis Islands to Brandon. Many of the spots I like are groceries, convenience stores

or country lunch counters, but Estela's locations are full-scale restaurants and surprisingly modern.

They once took orders on hand-held computers; they have a Web site (<http://www.estelas.com>) and sharp T-shirts. Still it's at most a chainlet; both locations are humble *madre-y-padre* places, a mix of unfinished repairs, handmade craft and touching art.

The simple tortilla has been twisted into nachos, flautas, tacos, taquitos, burritos, fajitas, chalupas, quesadillas, enchiladas and chimichangas in endless combination. Chains do much the same, although the sauces and meats here are cooked at length.

Look more closely and you'll see that Estela's goes beyond those staples, not just with chiles rellenos (smart chains have them, too) but with tamales, which are to me the true taste of Mexico.

To me a tamale is young cornmeal, fresh stuff that never grew up to be a tortilla; it was mixed, beaten and molded by loving hands around a dollop of pork stew and steamed, the best of all street foods.

Poke through Estela's menu and you'll find other clues that this is not drive-through Mexican fare. For instance, there are tacos filled with freshly grilled carne asada, enchiladas topped with pork. Estela's chicken soup is more than a full meal, rice, meat, fresh tomato, avocado and cilantro in a broth no

toes, green pepper, onions and mushrooms with meat or preference (or zucchini and broccoli for vegetarians), which may be robust eating, but the quarter-sized shrimp were lost in it.

I'd add more beans, nopales, corn, pickled carrots and other vegetables on the side, and put a broader variety of meats and fish on the grill.

Even I eat only one meal at a sitting, and I'd sit down happily at Estela's any time for a cold Bohemia and a combination plate of nachos, tamales and taquitos, or a Negro Modelo, a steak burrito and chunky

**RESTAURANT REVIEW**

**Estela's**

209 E Davis Blvd., Tampa (813) 251-0558; 312 E Brandon Blvd., Brandon, (813) 657-1421

**HOURS:** 11 a.m. to 10 p.m., Sunday through Thursday; 11 a.m. to 11 p.m., Friday and Saturday

**RESERVATIONS:** No

**CREDIT CARDS:** AE, D, DC, MC, V

**DETAILS:** Full bar, smoking sections

**WHEELCHAIR ACCESS:** Good

**PRICES:** Lunch, \$3.50 to \$5.95; dinner, \$4.25 to \$9

**SPECIAL FEATURES:** outdoor seating, live music on weekends.

one had the heart to defat.

At the table, you'll sense the true distinction: The food has been freshly made and the sauces didn't come from a can.

Mole poblano — order anything that comes with it — came from a rich memory and a warm heart; this is one of the many moles from around Puebla, not a chocolatey one, but still one with deep, earthy flavors.

Likewise, the chile colorado, real strips of steak in a smokey chile as good as the mole. A competitive

Please see **ESTELA'S** 35W

**Estela's** from 34W

chilihead should find serious inspiration in a taste of the real thing. If it's not got enough fire, ask for the hot sauce.

It may look watery and wimpy, but it's homemade and plenty hot. There's supposed to be a sauce of tart tomatilloes, too, but it was missing from my order one night in Brandon.

I'll do without shrimp fajitas on my next visit. Fajitas here are a huge pile of peppery, sizzling toma-

guacamole and refried beans.

Whichever, I'll have to have flan for dessert. It comes with sprinkles, but the caramel glaze gilds the eggy custard so perfectly.

Mostly I'll come for the easygoing atmosphere, and certainly for the mariachi music.

Even on Davis Islands' casual strand of neighborhood restaurants, from Italian and Greek to a British pub, Estela's lifts the spirits and creates a rare sense of ease. In the suburban brawl along Highway 60 in Brandon, Estela's is not as elaborate, but its homey flavor is even more welcome.