Bites

by Pancho Epstein

In the fashion and beauty industry, it's called a makeover:

I don't know what they call it in the restaurant business, but the new Del Charro Saloon, which was previously the staid Mañana, the bar, is a brilliantly conceived, upbeat watering-hole and eatery, a great inexpensive addition to Santa Fe's restaurant scene.

In the Inn of the Governors, on the corner of Don Gaspar and Alameda, you now enter the totally rebuilt and redecorated saloon through two picturesque wooden doors.

You'll recline in comfortable leather chairs, enjoy a giant screen television, warm your bod by a fireplace and order deliciously prepared and presented food with a top price of $5. Yes, just $5 for a meal — promptly served by smiling, convivial waitpeople.

Meals, which are available 11:30 a.m. to midnight, include a burger with fries, coleslaw or potato salad, $4; a salmon wrap on mixed greens with red pepper coulis and cucumber relish, $5; chicken Caesar salad, $5; a poblano chile stuffed with black bean corn relish, Jack cheese and topped with a chipotle cream sauce, $4; and much more.

And, with the exception of a well-done burger, the food comes out rapidly. That's obviously something management is tuned into accomplishing.

Three desserts — a double-scoop vanilla ice cream sundae, natillas and chocolate mousse — come in at just $3 each. Go with the natillas.

And now for the adult drinks.

Three beers are on tap, including a wonderful Guinness, poured with a proper head.

But the real kick is Del Charro's specialty drinks. I sampled all five, but if you want to try two especially interesting ones, order either the house white sangria (chardonnay, peach, schnapps, pineapple juice and a muddle of Sprite), $5.75, or the Texas Irish coffee, hot coffee with Tia Maria and brandy, topped with whipped cream, $6.75.

Oh, also served from the bar is a delicious house margarita, $5.50, featuring a large lime soaked in tequila as part of the visual sensation. The drink is served in a petite silver margarita shaker — a really pretty and tasty presentation.

The waitpeople, bartenders and ever-present management are friendly, attentive, communicative and on top of things.

In fact, if you work downtown and go for lunch and don't drink — which you shouldn't at that hour — and order just tap water, leave a tip larger than 15 percent. On a rapidly served, prettily presented, tasty $4 meal, a $2 tip is not excessive.

So, you can now eat lunch or get an early evening or late night snack at excellent prices in an upbeat setting in downtown Santa Fe.

Congratulations to whoever is responsible. Del Charro ("colorful cowboy") deserves to become a relaxing local hangout.