

Caliente

RESTAURANT REVIEW: FIRE + SPICE

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We're not sure how we discovered Fire + Spice in the Sheraton Tucson. There's no street sign pointing the way. No big splash on the Sheraton's Web site blazing a trail to an earth-toned dining room that's just big enough for 100 or so diners near the swimming pool. Since opening in February as part of a \$5 million hotel renovation that started in late 2008, Fire + Spice has quietly dispensed inventive takes on regional cuisine to hotel guests and others who have happily stumbled upon it. Executive chef David Ferrara and his sous chef, Megan Banks, mined the area's Native American and Hispanic cultures to craft a menu that captures the taste and spirit of his hometown. Jalapeños, a definitive chile in Sonoran cuisine, perk up a prickly pear jelly that marinates jumbo tiger shrimp paired with a petite beef filet (\$24). Sweet potatoes appear with several entrees and take a starring role in the vegetarian-friendly chile relleno (\$15). A prickly pear jalapeño sauce gives sweet and spice to the wings del diablo appetizer (\$8), which comes with a chipotle ranch dipping sauce. Ferrara, 33, was born less than a block from the Sheraton's kitchen at Tucson Medical Center, and got his start cooking at a retirement home. He's been at the Sheraton nearly 12 years, six of them as executive chef. Fire + Spice replaced the high-end Rancher's Club steakhouse, which had been at the hotel for about 20 years. Ferrara said Sheraton decided the upscale eatery no longer fit the hotel's price-point — nightly room rates average under \$170. This is the second Fire + Spice; the first opened in 2008 at the Tempe Sheraton. They operate independently, and the chefs are free to express their own culinary visions based on the region. Hence Ferrara's Tucson-centric menu: Santa Cruz club wrap, Santa Rita steak salad, Sonoran quesadilla, San Pedro taco salad. Fire + Spice is not a cheap eat. Prices fall into the moderate range. And the portions, artfully displayed on skinny rectangular plates, are ample enough to satisfy but don't allow for leftovers.



We discovered over a pair of visits in the past several weeks that it is food worth savoring. Flavors play off spicy and tart, savory and sweet, heavy and light, each given enough free reign to enhance the other without any one dominating. The result was a distinctive fire from the chiles in the dangerously addictive jalapeño snake bites (\$8), tempered by the cool and creamy shrimp and cream cheese stuffing, finished off with smoky accents from crispy bacon wrapped around the naked peppers. Spicy flashes played out in the chipotle Caesar salad (\$8, \$12 with chicken or shrimp), given its Southwest accents with salty Cojita cheese, kernels of fresh corn and blue corn tortilla strips sitting in for traditional croutons. Cubes of creamy sweet potato filled the unbreaded chile relleno (\$15), which is steamed and roasted and served with a side of fluffy, judiciously seasoned rice and crispy grilled zucchini, yellow squash and red pepper. Those grilled veggies are sided with the fire-roasted pork tenderloin (\$17), an upscale version of carnitas drizzled with a fresh and fiery Anaheim tomatillo cream sauce; and the shrimp and filet (\$24), served with a robust ancho port reduction. The filet was table-knife tender, but the shrimp was a bit underdone; we would have preferred it spend a few more seconds on the grill to caramelize and enhance the intensity of the tantalizing jalapeño prickly pear marinade. Desserts (\$7) are equally inventive, starting with Ferrara's chocolate of the moment, a rotating treat that celebrates the cocoa bean. On our last visit, he was playing with a warm cinnamon chocolate bread pudding, presented in a ramekin with gooey chocolate syrup and a small scoop of chocolate ice cream. While it was superb, it was no match for the rich chocolate insanity of the s'mores: a shot glass of hot, milk chocolate ringed with chocolate and chile powders served alongside four graham crackers — two topped with homemade roasted marshmallows, two topped with shaved chocolate. The chocolate-marshmallow combo was nostalgically divine, but it was that spicy hot chocolate that stirred our imagination. The hot liquid was a sweet introduction to the spicy chile powder that tingled the back of the throat. That's a sensation worth seeking out, even if there are no signs leading the way

