

RESTAURATOUR

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Modernist shapes and bold colors combine with archetypal Mexican elements in El Torito's new prototype.

New Mexico





zul rey" (king blue) is a color that looks as vibrant in Acapulco Bay as it does next to shades of pumpkin, squash, avocado and terra cotta on the walls of El Torito's Corona, Calif., prototype. The bold palette, combined with geometric shapes in a Mexican-modernist, old-meets-new

format, has already boosted weekly sales 8 percent higher than the average, despite 50 fewer seats, and attracted younger crowds to the unit that opened in mid-April.

"Guests in the 25-to-44 age group—those we view as our greatest opportunity—have responded well to the design, largely reflected in our increased happy-hour attendance and higher cantina sales [4.9 percent higher than average]," says Julie Koenig-Browne, vice president of marketing.

"For a while now, guests have been telling us they love what our chef, Pepe Lopez, has done to update menus with lots of regional Mexican dishes, but they felt our design needed a boost. It didn't reflect what we've become," Koenig-Browne explains.

"The whole idea has been to make a natural but vibrant transition from traditional Mexican to contemporary," says Mark Turpin, vice president of facilities and construction for the 70-unit chain.

Turpin worked with Costa Mesa, Calif.-based architects Scheer Tanaka Dennehy Riley to bring the higher-energy design to fruition, with its bold colors, more open floor plan and bigger cantina focus.

"We felt it showed the best potential to move us into the future without becoming dated," he says.

Traditional Elements, New Geometry

The first visual expression of El Torito's five-year authentic-Mexican menu crusade, the new design blends innovative Mexican ideas with archetypal details. Bits of the Mexican-colonial style the chain has used since 1954 including stuccoed walls, red-tiled roof, columns, arches and leather-padded chairs are still there. But they are now contrasted with new colors and geometric shapes.

The design was inspired by influential contemporary Mexican architect Ricardo Legoretta, known for building colorful partial walls in geometric shapes that overlay or intersect with portions of traditional buildings. "The juxtaposition of the new with the old retains history but adds a vision for the future," Turpin says.

Legoretta's inspiration is prominent in the main dining room, where a bright-blue partial wall splices the space. Set on a diagonal with large, flower-pot-filled openings throughout, the wall creates angles in the room, separating the main dining area from three smaller dining areas.

The wall also directs the eye across the room toward the cantina, which dominates the space. It features red and white tiles zigzagged across the front and a back-lit tequila display. A galaxy of pierced-tin stars hangs from the black open ceiling. Handmade Mexican pots filled with brilliant bromeliads are lit from above.



(Opposite) Mexican-colonial-style columns march down the middle of one of El Torito's dining rooms above half-walls and booths, which provide intimacy but allow clear views of the space.

Courtyard patios offer guests an open-air dining option.

El Torito's patio features a contemporary stepped wall that screens views to the parking lot.

Stone-ground corn masa is used for El Torito's tamales, handmade throughout the day.

BY MONICA ROGERS

SNAPSHOT

CONCEPT

El Torito

LOCATION

Corona, Calif.

OPENING DAY

April 13, 2005

OWNERSHIP

Real Mex Restaurants, Long Beach, Calif.

DESIGNER

Scheer Tanaka Dennehy Riley Architects, Costa Mesa, Calif.

AREA

8,000 square feet

SEATS

307

AVERAGE CHECK

\$18.94

UNIT VOLUME

\$2.5 million

EXPANSION PLANS

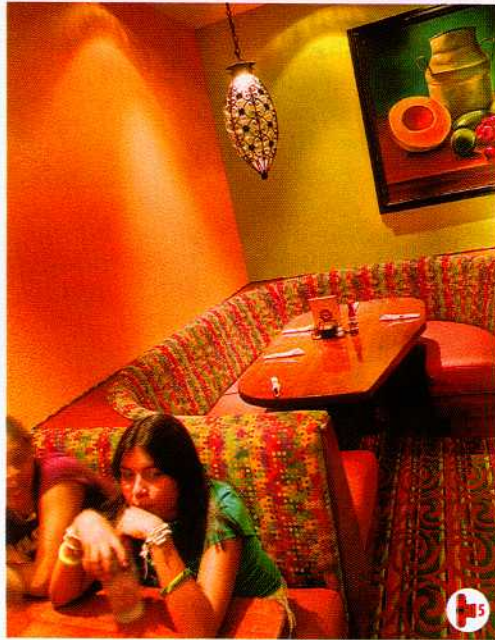
4 in 2005,
4 to 6 in 2006



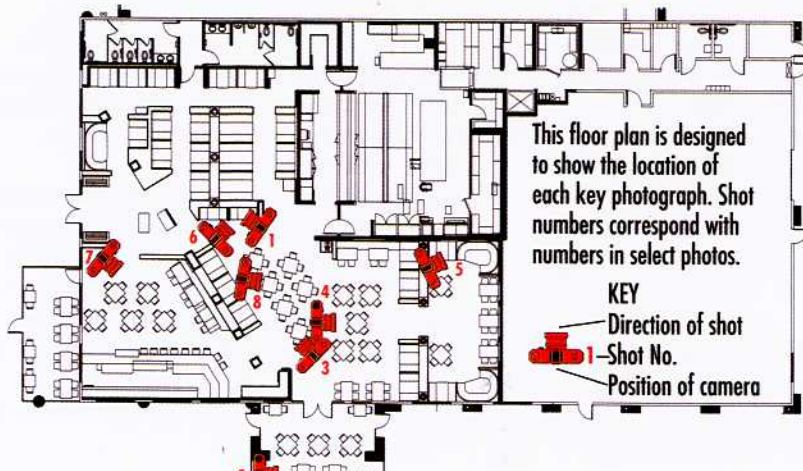
(Clockwise from top l.) Geometric wall cutaways and multilevel ceilings add angles and interest to the interior.

The avocado-hued gallery dining area works well for private parties.

Cantaloupe meets avocado above fabric-covered booths that wrap around El Torito's dining room.



The higher-energy design with a more-open floor plan and bigger bar focus keeps step with El Torito's food upgrades.



Building a Better Bar

Operational enhancements include stain- and weather-resistant laminate "stone" on the bar and patio tables. "This material works much better than granite or marble, which break down with constant exposure to juices and margaritas," Turpin says.

The company also decided to go with one long bar instead of a T-shaped version to serve more people at once.

Another improvement: eschewing tall bar tables in favor of tables set at regular dining height to encourage full meals in the bar. "People are looking for the fun and energy of the cantina in their dining experience," Koenig-Browne explains.

Clear and Colorful

Beyond the blue wall, three dining areas complete the room. "All work together to give the space a greater feeling of openness than previous store designs, which we felt had too many nooks and crannies," Turpin says. "At many of our other locations, it's impossible for one manager to view the entire room. This design gives clear views, but the partial walls and arches still give customers a feeling of intimacy."

The color scheme blends pumpkin, squash and terra-cotta tones. Fabric-covered booths wrap around exterior walls with colonial columns and arches backing up more booths down the middle.

The yellow-toned main dining room sequesters six booths and chair-and-table seating for 48. At the back, through another series of columns and arches, the small,

RESTAURANTOUR

MENU SAMPLER

ANTOJITOS

Sopes filled with shredded beef or chicken over frijoles with avocado, chipotle crema fresca and cotija cheese, \$6.99

SOPA

Tortilla Soup: chicken-chile broth with chicken, vegetables, tortilla strips, cheese and avocado, \$4.99

COMBINACIONES

Tamale & Enchilada: chicken or carnitas, served with refried beans, rice and sweet corn cake, \$8.99

TRADICIONALES

Shrimp Mazatlan Enchiladas:

sautéed shrimp with tomatoes, onions, roasted chiles and Jack cheese with fire-roasted tomatillo and tomato-jalapeño sauces; with frijoles de la olla, rice and fruit relish, \$12.49

(Clockwise from top) El Torito's new color scheme begins with pumpkin, squash and terra-cotta tones.

Not just noshing: Weekend diners gather in El Torito's bar area for full meals under a constellation of tin stars.

In the main dining area, warm wall tones provide a gentle backdrop for bold paintings by Los Angeles artist David Early.



“The 25-to-44 age group—our greatest opportunity—responded well to the design,” —Julie Koenig-Browne, V.P. of marketing

avocado-hued gallery dining area works well for private parties.

Adding more energy to the space, eye-popping paintings by longtime El Torito associate and Los Angeles artist David Early depict lush tropical fruits, flowers and Mexican culture. Each painting represents an important Mexican artist or movement. “Fiesta,” for example, is done in contemporary realism, while “Serenata” reflects the darker-toned Mexican realism of the 1950s.

“The paintings are one more way we can underscore our commitment of authenticity,” says Koenig-Browne, “also strengthening the connection between the art of Mexican cooking and the art of Mexican design.”

Next Generation

While future remodels will follow the same interior design, exteriors will be fancier. The main dining patio gives a glimpse of where store exteriors are headed. A

Legoretta-inspired stair-stepped wall creates a pleasant courtyard environment that hides the parking lot. Large, square cut-outs, cleverly arranged above the seated customer's eye level, give views to the sky or potted plants but block passing cars and pavement.

Overhead, the beams of a wooden trellis are a Mexican-colonial touch. “Future designs will use a lot more of this in the building exterior,” Turpin says. “More geometric shapes creating little courtyards and such. There's a timeless quality to the shapes that we like.”

El Torito plans to use the design as it continues to expand in California, Oregon and Arizona as well as new markets in the Midwest. This year it will open another prototype in Temecula—the first new construction in six years and first to showcase the full exterior redesign. The company will then remodel many of its older units to reflect the new look. **CL**