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Casual dining's

not-so-casual

approach

El Torito, the casual Mexican chain based in Long Beach, Calif., repositioned itself in 2000 as a "Real Mexican" restaurant under the leadership of chef Pepe Lopez. Though the marketing of Lopez as chef is new, he has worked with the company for more than 20 years. It also has added a separate menu highlighting "chef Pepe's favorite regional specials," which changes every 10 weeks to focus on a different region of Mexico.

The chain's focus on authentic food and regional flavors sets it apart from other popular Mexican and Tex-Mex restaurants, according to Chuck Rink, chief operating officer of El Torito/Acapulco Restaurants.

As an example, Rink points to El Torito's chile relleno. While most Mexican chains prepare the dish with a mild pasilla chile, El Torito has started using a spicier roasted poblano chile. "Over the years what the American consumer has come to know as the chile relleno is not the one you would get in Mexico," Rink says. "The one we serve is much closer to what you would get in Mexico. We've moved more toward an authentic product and ingredients that are indigenous to the various regions." The restaurant also recently began serving soft corn tortillas in addition to hard corn tortillas and soft flour tortillas.

El Torito has updated its decor to reflect a classic Mexican hacienda style with brighter colors, canterra stone, classic fountains and more contemporary decor, including an up-lit tequila display and colorful art. ■



Under the guidance of chef Pepe Lopez, above, El Torito added to its menu regional Mexican specialties that change every 10 weeks. The chain also updated its decor to mirror a classic hacienda.

