

BEIJING--When I arrived here in the fall to teach journalism at Tsinghua University, a Chinese colleague of mine, a Penn State-educated Ph.D., told me where I could find a nearby Subway, Pizza Hut, McDonald's and Starbucks. What he didn't tell me about was the nearby Mexican restaurant.

So imagine my surprise to learn that not only was there a Mexican restaurant near campus, but that it was owned by a Chinese woman and had been started with an American as a partner.

The founding Chinese owner of Niña is Zuo Weifeng, 27, who was interviewed by one of my students, Qiu Tan. Miss Qiu described Miss Zuo as “a lanky beanpole of a woman with a pronounced physical resemblance to Lucy Liu in Charlie’s Angels [and who] has an endearing, girlish smile.”

Miss Qiu also reported that Miss Zuo, whose English name is Ivy, opened the restaurant in March 2004 with an English teacher in Beijing who had lived in New Mexico for five years and really liked Mexican food. Miss Zuo had studied hotel management in college and worked for seven years in western-style food management in five-star hotels in Beijing.

The American, whom I cannot locate, was Niña’s first cook and has since returned to the States, but his Mexican recipes were preserved. It remains to be seen if enough Chinese will sample Mexican food to keep Niña in business.

“I have never tried Mexican food,” one Chinese white-collar worker told my student, “and I only heard of tacos. Because there are so many options in Chinese food, like Sichuan dishes, Guangdong dishes, Hunan dishes and so on, Mexican food is easily overlooked.”

Another one of my students is more optimistic. Ban Zhuo, a native of Guangdong, believes that the heavy and spicy nature of Mexican food is “agreeable to Chinese taste.” She may be right. Every place I visited in China last fall I was asked: Do you like spicy food? I surprised them all by answering “Yes!” One incredulous Chinese man would not believe that New Mexico raised its own chiles. They had to be imported from China, he insisted.

Let me stipulate that Chinese food served in the United States is not the equal of Chinese food served in China. And Mexican food served in China is not the equal of Mexican food served in Santa Fe. Let me also stipulate that I am a better travel writer than a restaurant reviewer.

The first time I ate at Niña with a fellow Fulbrighter, mariachi music played in the background as we sipped our Coronas served with lime wedges. Corona, by the way, is brewed in China, not imported.



I wanted a burrito but for the sake of variety changed to a chicken taco when my colleague ordered a burrito. He got a fajita; I got a beef taco. I was asked what salad dressing I wanted and ended up with what I assume was the house. The waitress never mentioned sour cream and guacamole and only later did I realize it was extra. Overall, the food was OK.

Our bill was 108 yuan and I left a 15-yuan tip, for a total of just a little over \$15 for two.

I returned a few weeks later, in December, at the behest of the *New Mexican* and sampled a wider range of dishes, beginning with chips and salsa, which was served in small bowls, one fine texture and one chunky. Neither had a bite. The chips were crunchy but otherwise neutral. The appetizer was served with little spoons to put the salsa on your chips. I dipped.

As I ate the tortilla soup, which had a bite that needed to be countered with a sip or two from my Corona (\$2.50 a bottle), Christmas music played in the background. I noticed two piñatas and a Mexican flag hanging from the ceiling, a guitar and a sombrero on the wall, and papercuts with Mexican themes. The floor had the same color tile that my wife and I have in our house in Santa Fe.



This time I got what I ordered, a beef burrito, although the waitress did not ask red or green. The burrito was almost flat and had the consistency of an overdone grilled cheese sandwich. And like my beef taco of the previous visit, it had very little beef, although what it did

have was spicy. I ate the burrito, but left the Spanish rice, which had color but no flavor.

Because I overindulged, the bill for me alone with tip came to a little over \$14. When I summoned the waitress for the check, she was sitting at the bar—eating a bowl of white rice.

For those Chinese who do not find Mexican food to their liking, Niña also serves sandwiches, Western-style rice dishes, beef brisket, grilled sirloin, french fries, deep-fried sausages, and for dessert—cheese cake, chocolate cake, banana splits, ice cream (12 flavors), milk shakes and Rice Krispies treats.

Eating at Niña's was a nice diversion, but it really served to remind me of how much I missed home.

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