

# New look, new menu, same charm at El Chorro

By Howard Seftel  
REPUBLIC RESTAURANT  
CRITIC

After a 72-year run, historic El Chorro was sold last summer and shut down in February. It reopened Thursday after a substantial re-design of both the property and the menu.

It wouldn't surprise me if it ran another 72 years.

Happily, the refreshing hasn't altered El Chorro's timeless, Old Arizona feel. The expanded patio, with its crackling fireplaces and spectacular views of Camelback and Mummy mountains, is where you want to sit. The new owners left the old bar room in much of its vintage state and added a big indoor-outdoor second bar.

Live music, meanwhile, plays in the lounge, and plenty of couples enjoyed twirling around the dance floor.

The opening-night crowd was mostly a well-dressed older group, the kind you'd see on a luxury cruise. We spotted gents in blue blazers with silk handkerchiefs, and smartly dressed women with jewelry so imposing one wondered how they lifted their arms or moved their necks.

Clearly, nostalgic long-

time regulars were waiting for El Chorro's comeback.

The menu, under the direction of new chef Charles Kassels, no longer seems to have been put together during the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Goodbye shad roe, liver and onions, shrimp de Jonghe and cha-teaubriand. Beef

stroganoff? It's available only as a Wednesday lunch special. Now, only the freebie relish tray — actually, it's on a plate, not an iced tray — takes you back three generations.

So, instead of partying like it's 1937, diners can now party like it's 1977: The menu has been updated to read like it was put together during the administration of Jimmy Carter. There isn't a single unfamiliar ingredient on it.

You will see traditional shrimp cocktail (\$20), five mutantly gigantic specimens, sweet and meaty, arranged around a pool of cocktail sauce. Other starters included plump, juicy grilled quail wrapped with prosciutto (\$15) and a pair of virtually all-crab crab cakes (\$14) that will be a great deal more appealing once the kitchen stops shaking on the salt.

Ask around, as I did, for staffers' pick as the



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One thing that hasn't changed at El Chorro is its signature sticky buns.

best main dish, and you'll get an almost-unanimous response: rack of lamb (\$44). I understand their enthusiasm. The two big, medium-rare chops were lightly crusted and superbly tender and flavorful. They're so good you won't need any of the minty béarnaise sauce.

It looked as if every other person was ordering the Scottish salmon (\$28), lightly coated with saffron butter. It's OK, but nothing special.

The crispy-duck platter (\$30) — a duo of roasted breast and leg



DAVID KADLUBOWSKI/THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

Waiters Sergio Castillo (center left) and Gilbert Carranza serve Andrew Zahansky and Chelsea Nelson on the patio at the newly refurbished El Chorro Lodge in Paradise Valley.

confit — could be special someday. But that will require putting a little more oomph into the orange sauce and getting rid of the inedible sweet potato gunk alongside.

Just as in 1977 (and probably 1937), main dishes come with soup or salad. I'd go with soup, especially if, like on opening night, it's hearty steak and onion soup.

Dessert? If you're smart, you won't need it.

You'll just ask for more of El Chorro's signature sticky buns. They're the Good, Old Days, in edible form.

Still, someone in your group should get the sticky-bun bread pudding (\$8). It's draped in a rich, thick bourbon sauce that tastes like liquid icing. You may hate yourself in the morning, but tonight, you'll have no regrets.

Valley philanthropist Jacquie Dorrance and

operating partners Kristy and Tim Moore are behind the resurrection of the restaurant.

Details: El Chorro Lodge, 5550 E. Lincoln Drive, Paradise Valley. Lunch and dinner, 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Mondays-Thursdays, 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Fridays. Brunch and dinner, 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. Saturdays, 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. Sundays. 480-948-5170, elchorrolodge.com.