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Joe Downtown: Michael Morton likes that his new La Comida restaurant is ‘a little off’



JOE SCHOENMANN

John O'Donnell, head bartender, left, and Michael Morton talk during a preview tasting at La Comida, Morton's new restaurant at Sixth and Fremont streets. The restaurant opens this week.

By Joe Schoenmann (contact)

Tuesday, April 23, 2013 | 4:24 p.m.

The monkey skeleton sign at La Comida, the new Mexican restaurant downtown, isn't there simply because it's unique, fun and destined in some distant future to end up in the Neon Museum.

A monkey-Mexican connection exists: Mayans, who lived in Mexico, considered monkeys divine creatures.

But even Michael Morton, who is opening La Comida (which translates to "The Food") at Sixth and Fremont streets, acknowledges that beyond its historical take, the sign, conceived by his wife, "is a lot of fun."

Many of the touches throughout his new restaurant have the same feel, from the neon-haloed angel in the bathroom to the life-sized, fanciful Day of the Dead diorama set into the wall just below the ceiling. Tile was taken from a building in Mexico, transplanted here and, if it was scratched, left that way.

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Wooden speakers hanging from the ceiling not only look transported from the 1970s, they are: Morton searched for old speaker cabinets on eBay, bought them, changed the “guts” inside but left them in the roughed up condition they came in.

“The fun thing about the building here is that if something is a quarter-inch off, you’d rip it out if you’re on the Strip,” Morton says. “Here, you’re embracing it because you want it to be a bit off. Whatever you do on the Strip, this is completely opposite.”

Co-founder of the N9NE Group, Morton knows well the high-end casinos of the Strip. When he moved here in the mid-1990s, he opened Drink, 200 E. Harmon Ave., a cavernous place described in the Review-Journal as “a boozy, psychedelic theme park.” His N9NE Group went on to operate eight restaurants and clubs in the Palms, and others in Chicago and Dallas.

Even Morton is slightly stunned that he is now opening a place on Fremont Street — and not even the section under the electrified canopy of the Fremont Street Experience.

“I have to admit, it’s shocking the change that’s going on down here,” he says. “I never thought I’d be downtown.”

He points to the northern wall of the restaurant, which is brick in places, but in other places the brick is missing. That’s how the building, which used to be an old laundry, was when he got it. And that’s how he is keeping it.

“We’re embracing the neighborhood and the community by embracing the aged building,” he said. “You know, it feels good.”

La Comida’s menu includes traditional Mexican fare, with entrees ranging from \$12 (chicken enchilada) to \$25 (skirt steak with wild mushrooms and oven-roasted poblano peppers). A Mexican burger, one of the house specialties, is \$14.

After taste testings for friends and family early this week, the restaurant opens Thursday. A grand opening is planned for sometime in May.

Joe Schoenmann doesn’t just cover downtown, he lives and works there. Schoenmann is Greenspun Media Group’s embedded downtown journalist, working from an office in the Emergency Arts building.