

Santacafé is home to the tried and true

By ANNE HILLERMAN
For the Journal

Sometimes when I go out to eat, I welcome adventure. I'm up for something different, open to an experience that might be "interesting" rather than delicious.

Other days, I want a sure bet. I crave a familiar place, a favorite dish — something I've tried before — and the reassurance that I will be served by a competent, friendly staff.

Santacafé, a time-honored choice for many longtime residents and a trendy spot for newcomers, wins return customers with its consistency: good food and reliable service. It's a sure bet. Last week's impromptu lunch was no exception. In business since 1983, the restaurant lives in a historic 19th-century adobe. There's free parking in the lot behind the building, accessible from Washington Avenue.

Even though it was still April, hardier souls, warmed by the spring sun and the staff's attention, sat on the patio sipping white wine or bottled Perrier. Santacafé's patio offers first-class people watching beneath a lovely old cottonwood tree. If you enjoy dining in the fresh air, schedule a meal here in the next four months. (When you eat outside be sure to step into the restaurant building to look at the intimate little bar and the 35-foot-deep, stone-lined well.)

With winter's chill still in my bones, I opted for lunch indoors. The tables, as usual, were dressed in classic white. The antlers, fireplaces and smooth white walls would have made Georgia O'Keeffe feel right at home.

The Santacafé menu has creative, beautifully plated choices that include unusual offerings such as roasted duck spring rolls along with upscale versions of traditional favorites such as the Croque Señor, a grilled ham, cheese and green chile sandwich, or the house-made chips that come with the cheeseburger.

I loved my watercress salad with shrimp, asparagus and a bit of egg salad. The pink shrimp, vivid green watercress and white of the boiled eggs created a spring

Santacafé

★★★★

LOCATION: 231 Washington Ave., Santa Fe, (505) 984-1788

HOURS: Open daily
11:30 a.m.-2 p.m. and
5:30 p.m.-closing

FULL BAR

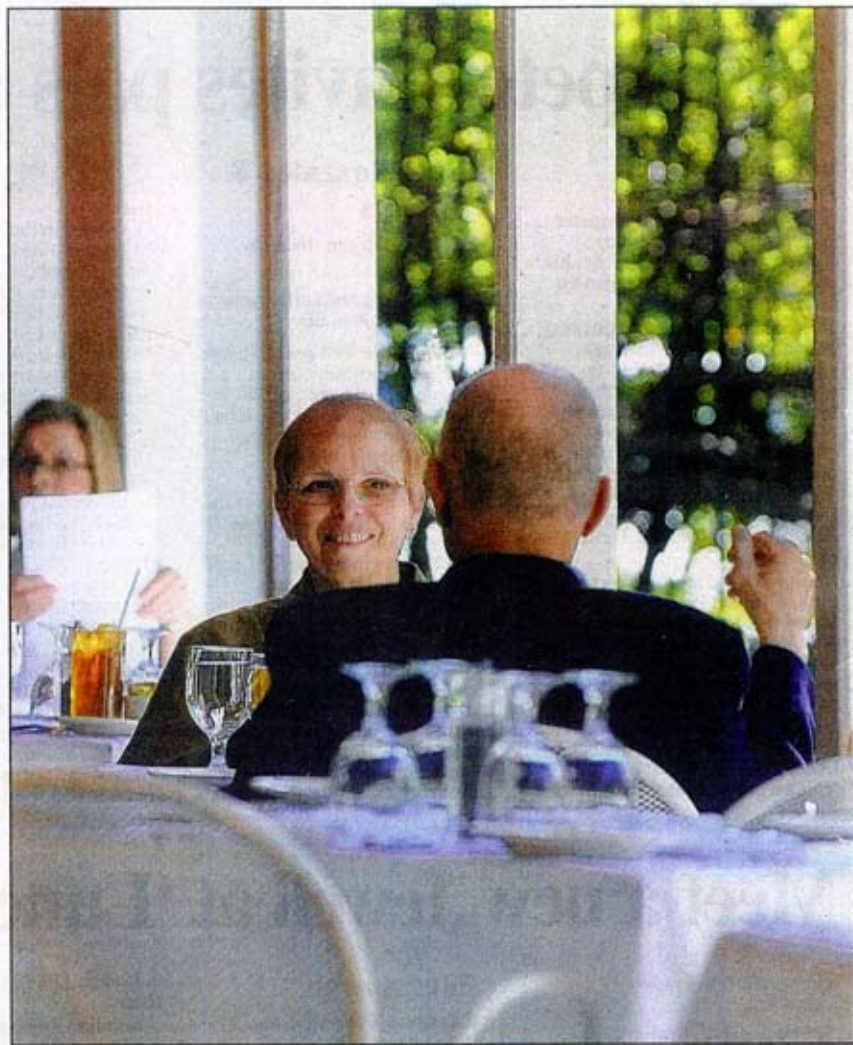
cantata of colors on my plate. The three large grilled shrimp arrived warm, as did the robust asparagus spears. Light and tasty, the salad left plenty of room for dessert. A tiny complaint: for \$13, I would have appreciated more asparagus.

My friend ordered the calamari, one of the Santacafé's signature dishes. The rings and tentacles are packed with wonderful flavor, crunchy and slightly chewy. The excellent Chile lime dipping sauce brings out the squid's flavor with a touch of spice and a whisper of sweet. The lunch special pairs the hot seafood with a more-than-adequate tossed green salad for \$11.50.

My other companion went for the oyster sandwich (\$11), one of the day's lunch specials. It featured large, lightly breaded fried oysters, slices of red onion, lettuce and mayo on a classic fresh chewy French bread roll. Often Po' Boy sandwiches have too much bread and not enough filling for my taste. Not true here. It arrived with a huge serving of hot French fries dusted with red chile. The hint of spice made them above average.

Perhaps it's because serving sizes are reasonable, but you often see folks eating desserts here, both at lunch and dinner (\$8 at lunch). The Crème Brûlée is especially wonderful, with a crowning crunch of melted sugar atop creamy, luscious custard. I like the homemade ice creams and the warm chocolate upside down cake. Gourmet magazine featured the recipe for Santacafé's white chocolate raspberry cheesecake recipe.

Reservations are a good idea here, especially as we move closer to summer. Don't forget the patio.



EDDIE MOORE/JOURNAL

Patty and Robert Lewis of Santa Fe celebrate their anniversary with lunch at Santacafé.

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