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## Rio Grande restaurant opens in former 'Real World' space

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Another out-of-state restaurant has moved into downtown Austin's Third Street neighborhood.

But unlike neighbors Houlihan's, Fleming's and Roy's, the new cantina in downtown's up-and-coming restaurant district hopes to tempt Austinites with char-grilled fajitas, fiery salsa and potent margaritas.

Fort Collins, Colo.-based [Rio Grande Mexican Restaurant](#), which recently opened its doors in Austin, may stir up business with more than its food. At 301 San Jacinto Blvd., Rio Grande is located in MTV's former "The Real World: Austin" house, a fact restaurant management does not plan to market, but gladly touts.

"We're not going to advertise as the 'Rio World,'" says Christine Sullo, marketing and public relations director for Rio Grande.

However, general manager Robert Allen says if the "Real World" connection will get customers to come inside for a look around, "we hope they stay for lunch."

Though MTV gutted the 7,200-square-foot warehouse space upon completion of "The Real World: Austin," Rio Grande spent more than \$1 million renovating the building, knocking down and creating walls, extracting a mezzanine and staircase, and turning one side of the building into a bar made from a 250-year-old cedar tree.

After jackhammering out the concrete floor, Rio management discovered a 120-year-old long leaf pine floor that is original to the building. And the well-known "Real World" pool has been transformed into a fountain guarded by "Longshot," a horse sculpture created by Houston artist Carrie Olsen.

The Austin Rio employs about 85 people, and is the company's seventh restaurant. It's also the first Rio location outside Colorado. Allen, who is also Rio's director of corporate expansion, says the company considered several states for the seventh Rio, but chose Austin because, as a growing college town, it is a good fit for the restaurant.

"Austin just felt right to us," Allen says, adding that owner Pat McCaughran is from Texas. "It just felt like home, and we won't open any more restaurants until we make this one work perfectly."

Though Rio Grande faces competition from dozens of Austin-based Tex-Mex restaurants, Allen and Sullo say they can win over customers by shying away from food trends as the company eats up its share of Texas' \$30 billion restaurant industry.

"A lot of food critics say they are looking for new twists on Mexican food," Allen says. "That's not what we're about. We're about doing it the old-fashioned way, with flavor. Our food isn't gourmet, it's comfort food."

Luisa Mauro, president of the Greater Austin Restaurant Association and co-owner of Carmelo's

Italian Restaurant, says the Austin Rio has a good chance for success.

"Austin does support its local businesses, but with Rio Grande being in the 'Real World' house, I would think that would drive business, both from locals as well as from tourists curious to see the place," Mauro says.

She says one way Rio Grande can ensure business is to align with area hotels, which often promote nearby restaurants to visitors.

"Austin's a challenging market, but if they've done their research, they should perform well."

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