

June 9th, 2010

## Restaurant review: Mucho Ultima Mexicana

by Richard Foss

I have had plenty of conversations with longtime beach residents who tell me how dining out used to be better – parking downtown was cheap and easy, restaurant servers knew both their customers and their business, and nobody looked askance at you because you were not wearing this year’s styles. Without actually disputing any of those points, because as a general thing they’re right, I tend to counter that other things have improved so much that I prefer dining out now. I’m walking further, paying more, and dealing with attitude, but I have more options for both sophisticated and traditional ethnic food than could be found even a few years ago.

In some cases those two categories merge, as in Mucho Ultima Mexicana in Manhattan Beach, which is simultaneously traditional and contemporary. When this place opened I liked it but didn’t love it. There were great ideas there, but occasional erratic execution. I’ve been back several times and can now state conclusively that they’ve got everything down pat. The service is now as polished as any place in the South Bay, and the food connects modern ideas to ethnic roots in a way that is rare anywhere.

The smartly decorated interior and loud but not deafening music mark this as one of the lounge/restaurant hybrids that have sprung up in the last decade, but with an emphasis on the restaurant side. Specials change regularly and there has been plenty of thought about what works together on a plate. The appetizers are suited to either bar noshing or starters for a serious meal. We commenced with fried calamari tossed with chili aioli and an order of guacamole to go with the freshly made chips. (Those chips arrive dusted with a cinnamon-chili powder that some people love and some don’t – let your server know if you’re in the latter camp and they’ll bring out some plain ones.)

The “hand-hacked” guacamole was very fresh-tasting and on the mild side. I like it spicier, myself, but admit that it’s sensible to serve it this way since you can always add spice, but not subtract it. The calamari was much more interesting – not the usual crispy, mostly texture bar snack, but something with elements of spicy, sweet and sour, and smoky in the sauce. The tempura batter was still crisp with just a light coating of sauce, so the joy of textures was still

there. This is the best fried calamari I can remember having, and that's saying something because I really like the stuff.

On other trips I've tried the queso fundido, a dish of baked cheese with a dash of lime that is delicious but difficult to eat neatly. The molten cheese develops long strings, and it takes a bit of practice to develop the slight twist of the wrist that keeps it off of your shirt. The chicken quesadilla hit the spot too. The unusual flavor of basil oil add an herbal kick to a classic snack.

I decided to have a glass of sangria with our starters, despite the profusion of beers, margaritas and mojitos offered. The mix of wine and citrus goes down easy with spicy food, and some items here have bold flavors indeed. I was glad I had some sangria left after my first bite of Pollo Borracho, a double chicken breast braised in citrus-chili sauce and finished with tequila. It was as hot as anything I've had in a Thai restaurant, and as full of flavor. In fact if I had been served this entree without a cultural context I would have guessed that it was Thai or Szechuan Chinese. Many cultures use citrus and hot spices because it's a great combination. The side dishes were non-traditional, but had more of a Mexican spirit. The creamed corn with herbs and jalapeños had a fine sweetness and slight kick, and the jalapeño potato gratin took common elements in Mexican food – potatoes, cheese, and peppers – and put them together in an uncommon way.

My wife had selected a combination plate of a black bean and cheese taco and a carnitas burrito, items that were done well but more traditionally than anything else we had that evening. They were tasty, but the items that really shone were the sides. I rarely order fried yucca because it is usually gluey and starchy. This was the lightest, crispest, tastiest yucca I have ever had. Whatever alchemy the kitchen uses to get this effect was inspired. The sauteed vegetables were more than just the usual too. The zucchini, tomatoes, onions, and peppers had a hint of garlic and herbs that would have made them a nice vegetarian entree. (In fact, as with most Mexican restaurants, a vegetarian can eat very well.)

Our companions had ordered the blue corn tortilla crusted mahi mahi and another combination plate, this one with a pork tamale and a carne asada taco. The tamale suffered from an unusual fault, namely, too much meat. The stuffing was so generous that the masa around it was a thin coating, and I like the taste of the corn. It wasn't bad — tasty meat steamed in a very thin corn wrapper — it just wasn't a tamale as we know and love them. The asada taco had the balance right, tender meat with just the right char from the grill, and the black beans that were on the side had what tasted like a dash of Caribbean spices to liven them up.

The mahi mahi was unexpectedly mild. I had expected it to be highly seasoned, but the kitchen left the natural flavor of the fish to do the talking. This was more than made up for by the roasted green chili strips and the tangy pineapple salsa that was on the side. At first I thought of this dish as out of balance, but after tasting it twice I changed my mind. We're used to meals where most of the artistry is in the main entree and the sides are simple and emphasize natural flavors. But reversing the pattern is perfectly valid. All the flavors played well together, and it was a thought-provoking selection.

Churros and flan were offered, and on other visits I've found them delightful, though on the sweet side. But on this evening I settled for a shot of premium tequila to finish. The bar at Mucho has some excellent, aged tequilas that have enough depth and smokiness to make a Scotch drinker happy. I had asked my server to recommend one and forgot to write down which one it was, which was sloppy reporting, but gives me an excuse to go back and sample bottles until I find it again.

All in all, our experience was enjoyable and moderately priced. Dinner for four, with three drinks, ran \$120. It was a thought-provoking meal, an exemplar of the newly multicultural South Bay that delivers dining experiences in tune with the rest of LA and the world.

MuchoUltima Mexicana is at 903 Manhattan Avenue, Manhattan Beach. Open midweek 5 p.m. to 10 p.m.; weekends 4 p.m. to 2 a.m. Full bar, wheelchair access OK, street parking. Reservations recommended.. (310) 374-4422.

<http://www.easyreadernews.com/restaurants/restaurant-review-mucho-ultima-mexicana>