

December 6, 2007

## LOS ANGELES TIMES: Mucho Ultima Mexicana's portions are mucho indeed



S. Irene Virbila

On a recent night out at the new Mucho Ultima Mexicana in Manhattan Beach, I looked across the giant booth at my friends and thought they looked awfully short. My margarita tradicional was muy delicioso and strong -- laced with Don Eduardo Silver tequila, freshly squeezed lime juice and a dash of Cointreau. But, no, it wasn't the drink. The seats are simply too low for the height of the table, so everybody looks like little people. Fortunately for the short of stature, there are plenty of other tables -- the place seats more than 100.

Mike and Andrea Zislis, owners of the stylish Shade Hotel in this beach city, have taken over the old Michi space on Manhattan Avenue and turned it into a lighthearted upscale Mexican joint. The décor avoids the folkloric and hits most of the trendy notes with a backlit tequila bar, the aforementioned ample booths, a flotilla of gold and orange hanging light fixtures and food served up on rectangular white porcelain. Waiters are super-friendly, and technologically advanced, sending orders to the kitchen on handheld devices. Chips and a pretty good salsa come almost immediately. Drinks too -- including eight different margaritas, hand-muddled mojitos and more. Order some hand-hacked guac and it shows up in the blink of an eye, heaped in a square, high-sided dish. Portions are generous, the better to share.

Other appetizers include sweet Mexican corn rolled in crema and cheese, a trio of ceviches, a delicious mess of peel 'n' eat Mexican white shrimp (though, on the night I was there, slightly overcooked) and the same jumbo shrimp served up as a cocktail.

This is not Mexican regional cuisine, but something more like California meets Mexico, where you can find a classic Caesar and platos Mexicanos -- two tacos, two chiles rellenos, two enchiladas or burritos, with choice of two sides. What arrives is a big boat of a dish, with guacamole, crema fresca and the two sides in separate dishes -- practically enough to feed the entire table.

Do not, I insist, miss the made-to-order churros for dessert. Piping hot and tender, the oversized squiggles of deep-fried dough come with caramel and chocolate sauces for dipping. Night owls may want to accompany that with Mucho Coffee, a Starbucks brew shot through with Sauza Hornitos reposado tequila. Between the margarita tradicional and the Mucho Coffee, your curiously short friends will be all the more amusing.

MUCHO ULTIMA MEXICANA

WHERE: 903 Manhattan Ave., Manhattan Beach

WHEN: Open 5-10 p.m. Tue.-Thu., 5-11 p.m. Fri. and Sat., 5-10 p.m. Sun.; full bar; street and valet parking

PRICE: Margaritas, \$8-\$45; muddled mojitos, \$10; appetizers, \$5.95-\$17.95; platos Mexicanos, \$17.95; other main courses, \$18.95-\$24.95; desserts, \$6.95

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