

Restaurant Review - Mucho

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The name says it all. Manhattan Beach's Mucho is mucho good with deceptively mucho portions and potent drinks.

This Mexican food restaurant is not your typical south-of-the-border-style eatery. There are no sombreros adorning the walls, the wait staff does not wear conquistador-looking vests or long colorful and voluminous skirts, but a sophisticated simple all-black uniform. Rather than mission-style furniture and wrought-iron chandeliers, the interior is sleek, the bar sits in front of a wall of geometric shelves with artfully placed liquor bottles, dramatically back-lit with a light that illuminates the restaurant with a soft orangey glow. In fact, the dining room's color scheme of dark woods, dusty orange and yellow lights and booths upholstered in dark colors of the same family is the only nod to what Mexican restaurant patrons usually associate with such establishments.



Mucho in Manhattan Beach

When sitting inside Mucho, you feel more like you're at a hip bar in Hollywood or Santa Monica that's awash in a soft orange light rather than the ubiquitous pale blue and white light as is the case with so many bars that are hoping to be hip.

One of the restaurant's most appealing elements is the outdoor-indoor patio, which can be rented out for private parties. The front of the restaurant is basically a wall of glass made with doors that can slide away creating an outdoor space, perfect for summer dining.

The food is also not typical Mexican-food fare. Instead of the large oval plate smothered with refried beans and rice creating a moat around a cheesy enchilada or burrito topped with sour cream, the entrees come out artfully and architecturally displayed on square white platters.

If ordering a combination plate, each side is neatly placed in its own little white square dish and all are served on the large square platter - no sloppy beans oozing over the side of the plate here. Entrees with a little more of a gourmet bent, such as the ever-changing chef's specials, are served similar to any fine-dining restaurant. The rib-eye steak was served thinly sliced, with the strips laid in a crisscross pattern over large potato pancakes or the chef's version of the school lunchroom favorite - the tater tot.

On Mucho's Web site it states that chef John Butler "interprets Mexican food for a modern palate, with alluring specials changing every two weeks. Influences range from North Africa (almonds and garbanzos, introduced to Spain by the Moors) to the jungles of the Yucatan (juicy pineapple)."

The food and drinks are very satisfying, from the beginning to the end. The drinks, most notably the margaritas, are innovative and combine freshly squeezed lime juice, Herradura tequila, Cointreau and Hawaiian amber cane sugar. Although margaritas are served both blended and on the rocks, a margarita on the rocks is given the bartender's special touch and made with fresh fruits crushed by hand to create a rainbow of specialty cocktails, such as mango or pomegranate.

Moving on from cocktails to dinner, guests can first treat themselves to an appetizer of Mexican fire-roasted corn for \$6.95, where corncobs are smothered in crema rolled in cojita cheese and sprinkled with ancho chili dust. When dinner rolls around, there are a slew of interesting sides to be had, such as the chipotle mac'n cheese or the jalapeno potato gratin.

Entrees range from the traditional combination plates of tamales, enchiladas and tacos to tortilla and pistachio-crusted mahi mahi for \$18.95. For dessert, Mucho has made-to-order churros, tossed in Mexican sugar and served with chocolate and caramel dipping sauce, a delicious carrot cake or Mexican chocolate cr me br lee topped with caramelized bananas and served with Mexican wedding cookies for \$6.95.

Mucho Ultima Mexicana is located at 903 Manhattan Ave., Manhattan Beach.

- The Beach Reporter staff