

Mucho Satisfying



Mucho Ultima Mexicana in Manhattan Beach serves tradition with cutting edge fine food

MERRIL SHINDLER

There's a statement of principle on the first page of the menu at Mucho Ultima Mexicana that begins with a challenge, a throwing down of the culinary gauntlet.

It reads, in part: "Here in Southern California, our passion for Mexican food and culture has been reduced to the grande bueno refried bean burrito washed down with a pre-mixed super sweet Margarita. In our rush to say 'Ole,' what we have lost is the rich tradition of the family table. We have forgotten to honor the way fresh ingredients are prepared with great care to create a culinary experience that is both satiating and sensual. Welcome to Mucho. It is our pleasure to open our doors and serve to you 'Ultima Mexicana.' "

It goes on to explain that, "We use hand selected tomatoes and avocados, all ripened under our watchful eye in our ripening room. Our warm corn and flour tortillas are served right from our comals to your plate. Our Margaritas and Mojitos are made with the freshest limes, hand-muddled with care. No mixes. No shortcuts. Mucho tradicional. Mucho Mexicana. Mucho."

This would be just so much chin music were it not for the simple and unexpected fact that Mucho lives up to every one of its promises.

It's easily the best Mexican restaurant to open in the South Bay since – well, I can't think of another Mexican restaurant this good that's ever opened in the South Bay.

Mucho is a serious competitor to Border Grill, La Serenata, and La Huasteca for the title of Best Cutting Edge Mexican Restaurant. And cutting edge it definitely is: One bite of the graphically described Hand-Hacked Guacamole (a dish that sounds as if Quentin Tarantino or Sam Raimi were in the kitchen making it), and you know you're not in Kansas (or Tijuana for that matter) anymore.

It's just mashed avocados. But it's also so much more. An order is made with two avocados, jumbled with tomatoes, chopped red onions, Serrano peppers, cilantro, lemon and lime, salt and pepper. It's just...terrific.

It makes me want to give a good tongue-lashing to those who serve the sort of factory mashed guacamole that arrives in bags. This guacamole is so simple, yet so elegant; it's a triumph of the basic concept of taking the best ingredient possible and doing more to it than necessary.

Even more wonderful things are done to the avocados that are turned into one of the three salsas on the appetizer called Tres Salsas.

Yes, bunky, they charge \$4.95 for a trio of salsas at Mucho. But those salsas are worth much more than that. They show up with some of the crispiest chips in town, and the threesome – along with the avocado, there's a roasted red, and heirloom tomato picot de gallo – is just about perfect.

An order of chips, salsa and a margaritas a fine way to while away the evening, watching the big game on one of the big screens in the bar. But then, you'd be missing so much.

Mucho sits in the space that used to be home to Michi – a wonderful restaurant in its time. This is a clearly blessed space, for what Michi was to Cal-Asian cooking, Mucho is too, Nouvelle Latino – the Place of the Moment.

Owner Mike Zislis and his partners have moved things around (including the front door, which went from left to right), opened the room up, and turned it into a more inviting space for large groups. Like it says up above, for the "family table."

The bar is an essential part of the Mucho experience (it would be less than Mucho without the bar), with margaritas that are hand-shaken, made with fresh lime juice, and coated (or not) with imported sea salt; instead of just being salt, it's salt with flavor.

There are 16 margaritas on the menu, ranging from the basic Mucho Margarita (made with El Jimador Silver, \$8), up to the \$45 Paradiso Margarita (made with El Tesoro Paradiso and Grand Marnier 100th Anniversary). In between, there are margaritas made with pomegranate, chipotle-pineapple and desert pear.

There are a half-dozen mojitos as well, all priced at \$10. Try the Moskojito made with Ketel One Vodka instead of rum. Nice.

Like the margaritas, the dishes also range from the basic to the sublime (though even the basics are pretty sublime).

At the starting line, you'll find the Platos Mexicanos – mix and match combos of tacos, chilles rellenos, enchiladas, burritos and sundry sides (killer sweet corn pudding, absolutely amazing). But even here the edge can be found – the tempura battered halibut tacos is essentially fish tacos on barely legal steroids.

There's another memorable corn dish on the menu – the appetizer called mazorca dulce, which is corn on the cob rolled in Mexican-style sour cream, coated with sharp cojita cheese and sprinkled with ancho chile powder. I've encountered corn on the cob akin to this south of the border, but it's never been quite this good.

As a rule, I like queso fundido, which is really just a highly evolved cholesterol delivery system. But this is like no queso fundido I've ever tasted. It's a heap of not just melted asadero and Machego cheeses, but also longaniza sausage and sautéed wild mushrooms. Every bite is a journey into a new flavor profile. It rocks.