

NEW YORK POST

THE MEX BEST THING

By STEVE CUOZZO



¡En tan corto tiempo como 18 meses!

¡Comiéndalo hoy!

University of Phoenix
Thinking ahead.

January 9, 2008 -- A new restaurant, Pampano, opened a few weeks ago in Mexico City, inspired by chef/owner Richard Sandoval's place of the same name on East 49th Street.

When an eatery in the Mexican capital emulates one here, what does it say about the prevailing wisdom that Mexican cuisine in New York stinks?

No other Manhattan Mexican can equal Pampano's combination of food and finesse. But I've been enchanted by most of the Mexican meals I've eaten for the past three weeks, from East 116th Street to West Broadway - enough mole, huitlacoche and epazote to hold me until July 4.

That's longer than I can usually stomach any single cuisine. Three weeks of Italian or Indian? I don't think so.

Welcome to Mexhattan, where something resembling "real" Mexican cuisine has finally taken over from Tex-Mex slop - and mole no longer tastes like chocolate pudding. We have more Mexican places for grown-ups than ever, more chefs born or trained in Mexico, and more menus truly attuned to the irreducibly foreign, sun-baked land to the south.

Back in 2000, in trashing Rosa Mexicano on Columbus Avenue, I wrote that Mexican cuisine was often "a letdown, insulated from honest criticism by politically correct foodies."

Yet, more recently,

I've had sublime, seven-chile-rubbed tuna at new Toloache on West 50th Street. Lamb shank mixiote at Dos Caminos Third Avenue braised to a luscious turn in a controlled fireworks of chiles and tomatillos. Veal sweetbreads "two ways"

at Centrico supple enough to drink.

I loved Zarela's rustic, pumpkin seed-crust cod and Pampano's suavely cosmopolitanized mariscada (shellfish stew). I went through ceviches of shocking sophistication at scenemaker-heaven La Esquina on Kenmare Street, and textbook chicken mole poblano at humble La Hacienda in East

Harlem.

Sure, certain dishes seem like modern-American tarted up with salsa. Sure, some quesadillas come out lame and flabby. And too many listings in the Zagat Survey cite "amazing," "knockout," "killer" and "deadly" margaritas, an alcoholic obsession found in no other cuisine.

But overall, today's Mexican choices beat the pantalones off those of the past.

Even in the days when most "Mexican" food here was a Tex-Mex burrito barrage formulated to cushion the intestines against a tequila deluge, we always had one or two good spots. Zarela opened 20 years ago, Maya 11 years ago. Rosa Mexicano on First Avenue was splendid when it was run by founding chef Josefina Howard, who died in 2004.

To see how things have improved in just five years, look at the 2003 Zagat Survey. There was no Pampano, Centrico or La Esquina. There was just one Dos Caminos (today there are three), and it was too new even to be numerically rated.

Today, Mexican restaurants finally can claim a proud place at

the Manhattan table. Thanks partly to the city's growing Mexican population, which supports the import of ingredients once hard to find, chefs no longer need to take shortcuts.

Mexhattan menus differ widely in approach. Pampano delivers updated spins on coastal seafood, with scarcely a mole to be found. The B.R. Guest chain's Dos Caminos trio bills itself as "modern-Mexican," while more rustically conceived Zarela prides itself on home-style recipes from Veracruz.

The divergent styles, and the brooding influence of traditional-Mexican advocates, inspire pointless arguments over authenticity. Mexico is a vast nation of distinct regional tastes, and what works in the Yucatan does not play in Puebla.

Mexhattan might not precisely replicate the daily diet of remote villages - but neither do our local Italian and Indian menus.

Mexhattan cuisine is good by any definition. Confounding the demeaning orthodoxy that Mexican food should be cheap, our chefs now spend as much on raw materials as for any cuisine.

"When I first opened Maya," Sandoval says, "some people said, 'Why should we spend \$45 if we can go to Margaritaville and spend \$15?'"

Mexican-born Sandoval acknowledges, "I use more European cooking techniques" than is the norm south of the Rio Grande. But he calls his style true to the "flavor profiles" of Mexico, just as Anthos chef/partner Michael Psilakis legitimately claims his often creatively conceived dishes embrace the "flavor profiles" of Greece.

Ivy Stark, executive chef of Dos Caminos Third Avenue, says of those flavors, "We've barely scratched the surface in terms of complexity, ingredients and preparation."

Zarela Martinez's moderately priced menu is based on traditions of European-influenced Veracruz, but she, too, admits to creative updating - applying

a pumpkin-seed, sesame and peanut crust to delicately baked cod, for example.

She noted, too, that her fish is done more lightly than in Mexico "where fish is usually overcooked by New York standards."

Toloache, under chef Julian Medina,

is the new kid on the block.

It's great when it's on and mediocre when it falls victim to the tidal pull of tourists and Broadway curtain times.

But it's a welcome addition to Mexhattan - a sunny cuisine that's come into its own just in time for the cold winter to come.

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