

Review: Besito Mexican in Tampa a solid, date-worthy Mexican restaurant



Laura Reiley, Times Food Critic

Monday, April 27, 2015 11:37am

TAMPA

It means "little kiss" in Spanish, and Besito Mexican is certainly seasoned restaurateur Chris Sullivan's latest smooch to the Tampa Bay area. The Outback Steakhouse founder debuted the wine bar Carmel Cafe (now Carmel Kitchen) a few years back, but it wasn't until he ran across John Tunney's "polished casual" Mexican concept, with two locations in Long Island and one in Hartford, Conn., that he took the plunge with an all-new cuisine. Opened in April, this newcomer suits the space, fits a new niche and, perhaps best of all, provides a no-brainer for this year's Cinco de Mayo festivities.

Before you heft a pomegranate margarita or get too deep into that tequila flight to toast Mexican independence, just one question: Is May 5 Mexico's Fourth of July? Buzz. Thank you for being a contestant and we have some lovely consolation prizes for you today.

Mexico declared its independence from Spanish rule on Sept. 15, 1810. But it was the morning of May 5, 1862, when 5,000 ill-equipped Mexican soldiers whooped the French and traitor Mexican army of 8,000 at Puebla, 100 miles east of Mexico City. Although the Mexican army was eventually defeated, the "Batalla de Puebla" became a symbol of Mexican unity and patriotism, a demonstration to the world that these Latin Americans were willing to defend themselves against foreign intervention. Not totally an upbeat reason to clink Dos Equis, but I'll take it.

Besito is something rare in these parts: a white-tablecloth, date-appropriate chain Mexican restaurant. We have loads of sweet mom-and-pops and budget-minded chains. This self-assured newcomer, adjacent to Maggiano's Little Italy and P.F. Chang's, took over the Palm steakhouse location, which closed quietly last year.

In this window before Tampa summer sets in with a vengeance, the best seats are on a covered, wooden pergola-ed patio out front. But the interior is seriously attractive, from a long gleaming wooden bar to a broad wall of hundreds of flameless flickering candles.

Dinner only for now (lunch debuts in May), the proper introduction is a basket of warm, thin, house-fried chips and a chunky pureed salsa with a medium kick, best paired with something from the extensive tequila list (you can put together your own flight of blancos, reposados or anejos, the comparisons yielding glorious nuances — this one peppery-spicy, that one melony and floral). The house guac (\$9.95) in the traditional footed molcajete (mortar and pestle) is a nice foil for the salsa, but on two visits it was super heavy on onion, which takes away from the velvety plushness of the avocados.

Among the starters are a number of successful options, several of them laudably vegetarian: Tiny empanadas stuffed with goat cheese and mushrooms (\$7.95) came with a bright, tangy green salsa, that same salsa showing up as a stylish accompaniment to a squash blossom quesadilla (\$8.95) with just a touch of roasted green chile heat and more mushrooms. And a trio of fried shrimp tacos (\$10.95) packs in enough textural and flavor interest — chipotle cream salsa, cilantro, etc. — to be a welcome shared appetizer or a light-appetite entree.

Presentations are a step up from most Mexican restaurants in these parts, with adorable little covered baskets of warm corn tortillas and communal bowls of black beans and rice for the table. Five iron skillet options, really the house interpretation of sizzling fajitas, bring nice combos, from a mixed grill (\$20.95) to straight-up skirt steak (\$18.95) with a savory, cuminy oomph. Order the skewers of Alambre de Res, with New York strip and chorizo (\$24.95), and at least three servers will warn you about the incendiary little serranos tucked onto the skewers. Take heed.

But in general, dishes aren't off-the-hook spicy, often accompanied by one of seven or eight different house salsas, queso fresco and a flurry of herbs. Not every dish I had was scintillating, but the kitchen exhibits a clear effort to send out every plate with juxtapositions of colors and textures.

And at meal's end? Yes, there are flan and tres leches and competent spins on classics, but each table gets a complimentary bag of sugar-speckled warm churros to take home, along with tiny worry dolls to tuck under your pillow to let you sleep in peace. The little paper-fabric-string dolls are said to do the worrying on your behalf. But with the rollout of Besito in Tampa, and with others slated for Philadelphia and Boca Raton, it doesn't look like Chris Sullivan and business partner Hugh Connerty have much to worry about.

Contact Laura Reiley at lreiley@tampabay.com or (727) 892-2293. Follow @lreiley on Twitter. She dines anonymously and unannounced; the Times pays all expenses.



Besito Mexican

205 WestShore Plaza, Tampa

(813) 287-4800;

besitomexican.com

Cuisine: Mexican

Hours: 4 to 10 p.m. Monday to Thursday, until 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday, until 9 p.m. Sunday; lunch starts May 11

Details: AmEx, V, MC, Disc.; reservations accepted; full bar

Prices: Appetizers \$7.99-\$10.95; entrees \$17.95-\$24.95

Rating, out of four stars:

Food: ★★★ Service: ★★ Atmosphere: ★★★

Overall: ★★½

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