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BESITO, IN HUNTINGTON

March 11, 2006 by PETER M. GIANOTTI. STAFF WRITER /

BESITO

402 New York Ave.

Huntington

631-549-0100

(2 STARS)

CUISINE: Mexican.

ASSESSMENT: Upscale update.

OPEN: Tuesday to Sunday for dinner. Saturday and Sunday brunch. Closed

Monday. Weekend reservations recommended.

PRICE RANGE: Dinner main courses, \$15 to \$25; appetizers, \$6 to \$13.

Brunch, \$10 to \$20.

CREDIT CARDS: American Express, MasterCard, Visa.

NOTABLE DISHES: Fish Vera Cruz, budin de mariscos, red snapper taco, ceviche, tortilla soup.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS: Main dining area at street level.

DIRECTIONS: East side, south of Main Street, near East Carver Street.

Four stars mean outstanding; three, excellent; two, very good; one, good; none, fair or poor.

Sombrero-less and mariachi-free, absent bean burritos and minus chimichangas, Besito kisses goodbye the cliches clinging to countless Mexican eateries across Long Island.

The buoyant, upscale spot is restaurateur John Tunney III's latest local effort. He also brought to Huntington Blue Honu and American Burger. Chef Matthew Lake joins Tunney in the cause of liberating the cuisine from the mass-market perdition of taco hell.

Besito earnestly and energetically works at it. The dining room, former home of Lola restaurant, has been exuberantly overhauled, given a sunny hue, a eucalyptus wood ceiling and vivid artwork.

There's plenty of first-class tequila flowing in the restaurant and "agave lounge," and entertaining variations on the margarita theme. Devotees of [Rioja](#) and sangria won't be disappointed, either.

Lake's satisfying take on Mexican cooking almost invariably is preceded by table-side theatrics, as diners request guacamole and are treated to the smashing of avocados and company in the lava-stone molcajete. Have yours spicy.

Then, move on to a zesty sopa de tortilla, with more avocado, chicken, pasilla chile, cheese and cilantro. Lake sends out an excellent ceviche, on the sweet side, in effect cooking nuggets of mahi-mahi with orange juice.

Red snapper tacos also are recommended, capped with onion, lettuce and salsa. Zarape de jaiba, or lump crabmeat between fresh tortillas, finished in a slightly peppery cream sauce, similarly stands out.

And the queso fundido, or baked Chihuahua cheese with chorizo sausage, is ample and flavorful, as are the quesadillas calabaza, tortillas packed with roasted green chiles, squash blossoms, string cheese and salsa. Less appealing are the overdone empanadas with mushrooms and goat cheese; sleepy corn tamales with shrimp; and dull chicken flautas.

Lake, a veteran of Red Sage in Washington and 27 Standard and Rosa Mexicano in [Manhattan](#), prepares a spirited red snapper Vera Cruz, with peppers, olives, capers and tomatoes; and a lush budin de mariscos, a tortilla pie filled with crabmeat, concluded with a poblano-accented cream sauce.

His filete de res, or beef tenderloin crusted with tortilla and cheese, and juiced up with chipotle, is a rich choice. Likewise, the tender Yucatan-spiced

chicken breast. On the side: fried sweet plantains.

But chicken enchiladas with tomatillo cream sauce, shredded chicken mole poblano, and skewered shrimp with pico de gallo materialize bland and forgettable. So do dry-roasted wild salmon and drier pork tacos.

Desserts are few. The tres leches and chocolate cakes are modest finales.

Better are warm churros, south-of-the-border crullers with cinnamon and sugar.

Have them with hot chocolate.

Besito offers a glossary with the menu, in case you get your huitlacoche mixed up with your manchamanteles.

In any language, it's adios combos. Besito is an ambitious, welcome update.

And a good time.

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