

Courant.com

A LA CARTE

Besito Adds Modern Touches, Daily Variety To Traditional Cuisine

By LINDA GIUCA

Special To The Courant

July 16, 2009

Besito, the newest restaurant to open in West Hartford's Blue Back Square development, brings a Mexican food option to town, but it's far from the typical tacos and nachos outlet.

That's apparent by merely walking into the dining room. The pristine white walls and tablecloths and dark barn wood floors and beams create a clean, modern look with rustic touches. The soaring 30-plus-foot ceiling with its wrought iron chandeliers gives the 166-seat restaurant a spacious feel.

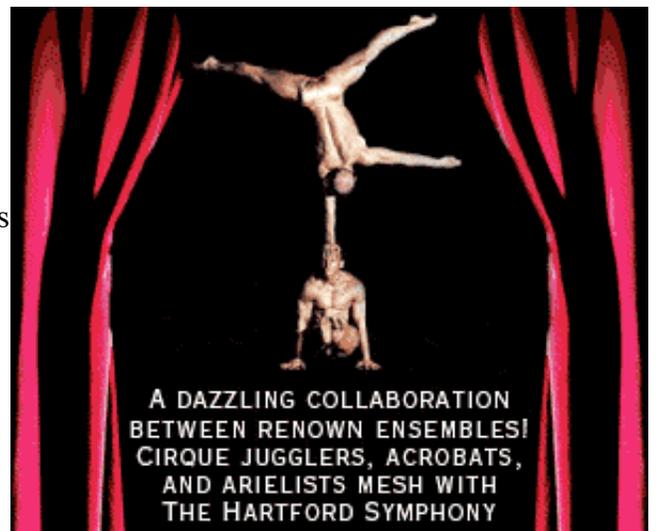
Most striking is the back wall of arched niches illuminated by electrified candles. The design element "started in the first restaurant, got bigger in the second restaurant and took the whole wall here," says manager Greg Ginther. "At night, it looks incredible. The light [from the candles] just dances."

Owner John Tunney III brings Besito to West Hartford after successful openings in Huntington and Roslyn, N.Y. He says that expanding across Long Island Sound "made sense" and that he looked at locations in Fairfield County as well as West Hartford.

Blue Back won out for several reasons. "I really liked Blue Back Square, but knowing West Hartford as a dining destination made the selection even more exciting to us," he said in an e-mail. "I also fell in love with our location in the original Town Hall building — its tall ceilings, outdoor patio and authenticity."

Tunney's executive chef, Matthew Lake, named among the 10 best new chefs in the United States by Food & Wine magazine in 1997, created the core menu of Mexican specialties found in each restaurant.

Lake's appreciation of Mexican cuisine stems from his work with Mark Miller, founder of the renowned Coyote Café in Santa Fe. Lake helped to open Miller's Red Sage restaurant in Washington, D.C. Although Miller's restaurants were devoted to Southwestern cuisine, the chef's knowledge of Mexican food and



culture had a tremendous influence. "If we made a mole, we made a mole the authentic way he learned in a village in Mexico," Lake says. "That was sort of my gateway to this cuisine."

In Lake's opinion, Mexican food is a fascinating way to eat. "I think people are shocked and pleasantly surprised — shocked at the level of sophistication of the cuisine," he says. "The cuisine is older than many European cuisines. The difference is its structure, the recipes and techniques handed down, still to this day, verbally generation to generation. Grandmother's kitchen is the heart and soul of the cuisine."

In addition to the core menu, which offers unusual tacos fillings and guacamole prepared tableside, the chef at each restaurant creates daily specials. "Where I let the chef exercise or flex their creativity is in the specials," Lake says.

At the West Hartford Besito, 22-year-old head chef Steve Yopp, a culinary school graduate who has worked for Lake for four years, relishes the chance to create those one-of-a-kind dishes. One of his recent daily specials was grilled scallops marinated in a cilantro and hazelnut puree and served over white sweet potato puree.

"We like to do the broad spectrum of Mexican regions," says Yopp, who singles out the Tacos de Cochinita Pibil as a tasty example of the regional fare. Pork is seasoned with achiote and braised in bananas leaves. Yucatan pickled onions and sweet plantains complete the dish. "It's a very traditional presentation from the Yucatan peninsula but very new for people around here," he says.

One of Besito's signature dishes — and popular with customers — is Salmon Manchamanteles, a roasted wild salmon served with crispy bananas, pineapple pico de gallo and mole manchamanteles, an assertive sauce made with ancho chiles from the Oaxaca region.

Yopp, who moved from Long Island to open the West Hartford restaurant, brought three sous-chefs with him from the New York restaurants. He points to the talents of one of those chefs, Adela Velez, as a saucier. "This menu is so good because of her," he says. "The moles she makes are absolutely perfect."

The kitchen prepares about 30 salsas to use in different preparations. "We'll gladly give tastes of any of the salsas," Yopp says.

Yopp admits that for a newcomer expecting Tex-Mex or Southwestern fare, the menu "seems like a scary menu, but it's not."

"We have some 'safe' choices, but I'd like people to branch out," he says, adding that the dishes on the children's menu are kid-friendly. "I would like people not to be afraid to try things."

Among those new things are more than 70 kinds of tequila, ranging from raw varieties to sipping tequilas aged at least one year. Guests can sample a flight of three tequilas of their choice or request a particular tequila as the spirit in a margarita.

The brunch menu offers a different take on Sunday morning eating with its Mexican egg, pancake and crepe dishes as well as more traditional Mexican dishes.

"We are a fine dining restaurant, but for some reason — and I love it — Mexican [food] gives permission

for people to have a little bit more fun," Lake says. "I really want people to have fun. Every chef does."

It seems appropriate that Besito serves not only lunch and dinner but also Sunday brunch. Its executive chef is the biggest fan of this most interesting cuisine. "I could eat this food breakfast, lunch and dinner," Lake says. "I can't say that about any other cuisine. I never, ever get bored with it."

Besito opens for lunch Monday through Saturday at 11:30 a.m. and for Sunday brunch at 11 a.m. The dinner menu is served from 3 to 10 p.m. on Sunday and Monday and from 3 to 11 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. Telephone: 860-233-2500. Website: www.besitomex.com.

On the Web

For more local dining news and reviews, visit courant.com/dining.

Copyright © 2009, [The Hartford Courant](http://TheHartfordCourant.com)