

April 16, 2006

DINING OUT

Old Mexico, Modern Infusions

By [JOANNE STARKEY](#)

BESITO, a newcomer in Huntington, is [Long Island's](#) premier Mexican restaurant. It leaves the competition in the dust, serving upscale Mexican food with complex sauces. There are none of the ubiquitous combination plates, those mishmashes where everything tastes alike and is blanketed in melted cheese.

Besito, which means little kiss, is the creation of an experienced restaurateur, John Tunney (who also owns the nearby, highly popular Blue Honu), and a talented chef, Matthew Lake. Mr. Lake was last at Rosa Mexicano in [Manhattan](#). Earlier, he earned his culinary stripes at Red Sage in Washington, where he cooked alongside the superstar chef Mark Miller of the famed Coyote Cafe in [Santa Fe](#), F.M.

Besito is a beauty. You won't see any clichés like sombreros or serapes on the walls, but the look says [Mexico](#). The lighting, though muted, is a major player in the décor. There is a row of hanging lanterns, each one different; wrought-iron wall sconces are shaped like masks, and a white adobe wall is made up of niches holding fat white candles.

(The staff helpfully passes out tiny key-chain flashlights for those who cannot see to read the menu.)

A brightly colored striped banquette rings the main dining area. Interesting artifacts and vivid artwork dot the walls. The floors are dark wood and the ceiling an arresting combination of eucalyptus reeds and rough-hewn beams. In short, Besito displays sophisticated good looks: a blending of rustic Old Mexico and au courant styling.

The restaurant has been mobbed since it opened in late February. Patrons were three deep at the bar on a recent Friday, and the noise they generated permeated the dining room.

Despite the crowds, the staff was super. Servers were helpful and very eager to explain the menu or unfamiliar ingredients. When our waiter noticed we were sharing, he immediately brought extra little plates. Any requests were filled immediately. Runners delivering dishes got it right every time.

As impressive as the décor and service were, it was the food that ran away with top honors. Start the meal with guacamole. It was made at tableside and was a tasty, chunky delight. Our waitress suggested a double order for our table of four, and she was right. We didn't leave a bite.

Another opener made for sharing was tostaditas con frijoles y queso, a mountain of blue corn nachos liberally crowned with black beans, melted cheese, chorizo, cream and salsa.

Move next to the tortilla soup, a flavor-packed triumph with pulled white-meat chicken, avocado, cilantro and Chihuahua cheese. It surpassed any version I have eaten in Mexico.

Other appealing openers were the refreshing house salad with greens, mango, tomato and crunchy jicama in a bitter orange vinaigrette; the soothing fresh corn tamale with shrimp; the crisp chicken flautas; and the quesadilla calabaza. The calabaza sported smoky grill marks and was filled with Oaxaca string cheese, roasted green chilies and squash blossoms.

The best entree was the pescado Veracruzana. The night we tried it, the fish was a thick white slab of tilefish. The tomato, sweet pepper, olive and caper sauce was first class.

Another eye-opener was the Swiss enchiladas. (In Mexico, creations with a cream sauce are often labeled Swiss.) The dish, which I have made many times, never tasted this good. The corn tortillas were filled with abundant shredded white-meat chicken and baked in a tomatillo cream sauce. That sauce had a vibrant citrus flavor and contained onions, cilantro and melted cheese.

A special of garlic shrimp atop a sweet plantain mash won kudos, as did fall-away-tender boneless short ribs.

Alambre de res, skewered beef tenderloin and chorizo over rice, got mixed notices. The sausage was outstanding, the beef a tad chewy.

Desserts were worth ordering. The citrus tres leches cake was a luscious version of the classic: moist white cake garnished with berries and cubed pineapple. The berry cup, mango cream crowned with mixed berries, was another hit. The restaurant usually also offers one or two desserts made with Mexican Ibarra chocolate: a moist chocolate cake one night, a layering of crepes and chocolate another.

Still, the best dessert was the one taken free to every table: churros. These warm, long spirals of fried dough were rolled in cinnamon and sugar and served with a goat-milk caramel dipping sauce.

Besito

402 New York Avenue, (Route 110),

Huntington

(631) 549-0100

Excellent

ATMOSPHERE Upscale Mexican food in stylish surroundings.

SERVICE Top-notch.

SOUND LEVEL Very loud.

RECOMMENDED DISHES Guacamole, house salad, tortilla soup, tamale, chicken flautas, quesadilla, tostaditas, Swiss enchiladas, garlic shrimp, pescado Veracruzana, boneless short ribs, all desserts.

WINE LIST This is the place for margaritas, shooters, sangria and Mexican beers (eight at \$6 each). There are 19 still wines (\$22 to \$90), with half under \$30; six by-the-glass possibilities (\$8).

PRICE RANGE Brunch entrees, \$7 to \$18. Dinner appetizers, \$6 to \$13; entrees, \$15 to \$24.

CREDIT CARDS All major cards.

HOURS 5 to 11 p.m. Tuesday to Friday, 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Closed Monday.

RESERVATIONS A must.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESSIBILITY Fully accessible. A few steps to one dining area.

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RATINGS Extraordinary, Excellent, Very Good, Good, Satisfactory, Fair, Poor. Ratings reflect the reviewer's reaction to food, ambience and service, with price taken into consideration. Menu listings and prices are subject to change.

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