Dining Out

Kiss Kiss, Bang Bang
West Hartford gets a taste of high-end Mexican cuisine

We can all agree that Mexican cuisine is great, right? It's up there with Indian, Italian, French, Japanese and Chinese in terms of global culinary achievements. The complex spice mixtures, the masterful use of heat, the comforting texture and aroma of the fresh tortilla, and all of that fantastic citrusy brightness. It's complex stuff. Why is it then that we often experience Mexican cuisine in its deservedly popular cheese-and-sauce menu offerings and to eat in the cathedral-like dining room at Besito, West Hartford's new top-shelf Mexican restaurant.

Besito has a picturesque Mission Revival interior, with wrought-iron candelabra-like chandeliers, rugged wood suspended in a barn-door fashion over the booths creating a rustic and intimate space, and a bar that features a towering wall of tequila bottles, like a huge reliquary devoted to the liquid mysteries derived from the agave cactus. There are more than 50 tequilas on the menu, which is conveniently divided into sections for those who want to test the stuff back and those who want to sip. (The house margarita — $8 — is a frozen concoction with equal parts fruity sweetness, citrusy zing, tequila bite and salty flourish.) Enormous close-up photos of horses lend a hint of vaquero chic. By the standards of most Mexican restaurants the imagery and decor is impressively low-key and reserved.

But the kitchen doesn't lack an aesthetic eye. Dishes are arranged with a keen attention to visual accents, pleasing asymmetry, and colorful contrasts. A fresh corn tamale appetizer with sauced baby shrimp and chipotle cream sauce had a playful configuration of dried corn husk, a hoop of white onion and expressive splashes of a slightly smoky sauce the color of setting sun. Those looking for a bit of granniness might be surprised at the creamed-corn quality of this dish, though taken on its own terms the slightly deconstructed tamale showcased the tender shrimp. The now-standard table-side guacamole preparation was conducted with a fitting solemnity. The waitress asked how hot we wanted the dip before spooning in chopped jalapenos. And the stone mulch-bate (a Mexican mortar) used for mashing the avocados had an impressive bowling-ball-like heft when placed on the table. The house salsa had a nice robust, roasted-garlic bottom end all rounded out by smoky hints and lime-juice tang.

Besito provides all the familiar comforts — there's no shortage of enchiladas, tacos, tortas, salads and quesadillas (though, come to think of it, I don't think I saw any barritos on the menu), but at the same time the selection highlights some Mexican specialties, like chayote squash, regional cheeses, cactus paddles, and sauces made with roasted pumpkin seeds.

A mixed plate of tacos ($13) presented a crisp selection of mildly seasoned meats — chicken, steak and shrimp — all showered with lettuce and crumbles of firm cheese. Not revelatory perhaps, but pleasing, even if I'd prefer them on soft tortillas.

A grilled beef tenderloin ($24) was cooked perfectly, topped with pepper strips and cheese from Chihuahua, all in a pool of brick-red pepper sauce, and served with refried black beans and pumpkin-seed-spiced rice.

And dinner ends with a stylish flourish as well. Our waitress brought us a small bag of churros (the fried-dough treat dusted with sugar and cinnamon): “dessert for your dessert,” she said after we'd just finished a mug of dense and spicy Mexican chocolate pudding. And each diner receives a tiny Mexican “lucky doll,” which is like a bit of wire wrapped with thread. You put it under your pillow at night and it “takes care” of all your worries. A nice finishing touch.