FRIDAY, JULY 18, 2014

Besito Mexican: A Little Kiss of Deliciousness

New restaurants continue to open on a regular basis in Burlington, making it an interesting, suburban culinary destination. There have been a few new steakhouses, a BBQ joint, a noodle shop and more. One of the latest openings is Besito Mexican Restaurant, located at the Burlington Mall between Legal Sea Foods and Bobby's Burger Palace. The concept of Besito, which means "little kiss," was conceived by restaurateur John J. Tunney III and he opened the first location in New York in 2006. A second location was later added in New York, then a third in Connecticut and Burlington is now their fourth site with a fifth planned for Chestnut Hill.

Though Besito has only been open for about a month, I've dined at Besito three times (once as a media comp and twice on my own) and found it to be consistently good on all three visits, especially considering its newness. I'm impressed with its cuisine, service, and decor and look forward to dining there again soon. Besito is a welcome addition to the Burlington area, and it earns a hearty recommendation.
The decor in the dining room is rustic and elegant, with an intriguing wall of candles, over 150, on the back wall. There are numerous Mexican artifacts and works of art scattered around the restaurant, and they avoid the tackiness you find in some Mexican spots. You feel comfortable here, and that can be very important to the enjoyment of a relaxing meal.

As you first enter the restaurant, you'll see the mahogany bar, pictured above during the evening. At Besito, **Tequila** is King, and they stock over 75 tequilas, mostly priced at $9-$15, except for a few rarities. If you order tequila, you will also get a chaser of homemade **Sangrita**. Tequilas can be ordered in four different **Flights**, a serving of 3 shots such as **Blanco Silver**, **Reposado**, **Anejo** or a **Vertical** (priced $17-$23). There are plenty of **Margarita** options ($11-$13), including the **House “Besito Patron” Margarita**, featuring Patron reposado, Cointreau, pomegranate-tangerine juice and fresh squeezed lime juice.

They also carry 6 different **Mezcals**, though currently they do not have any Mezcal cocktails as they don't feel there is much of a market for them. As I've said before, Mezcal is under-
appreciated and Tequila seems to get most of the publicity. It is time that changed and more consumers understood the delights of smoky Mezcal.

The bar also stocks nine different Beers ($6 each), nearly all from Mexico, and about fifteen Wines, most available by the glass ($8-$12). The wine list is ok, with plenty of familiar names (though nothing from Mexico), but the bottle prices generally seems to be marked up 3X retail. However, you probably aren't coming here for the wine. You can also opt for Sangria, white or red, for $9/glass or $30/pitcher.

The Food Menu, which is the same at all locations, was developed by Executive Chef Carlos Arellano, who began learning about cooking when he was a teenager working at his family's cevicheria in Mexico City, and Executive Chef Scott Wojcik. The restaurant is open for lunch and dinner, and though the full menu is available all day, there is an additional lunch menu with some extra options. Both menus note which dishes contain organic ingredients.

On the lunch menu, you will find Taquitos (soft corn tortillas, 3 choices, $11.95), Ensaladas (4 choices, $13.95-$14.95), Tacos Dorados (hard tacos, 5 choices, $11.95-$13.95), and Quesadillas (3 choices, $8.94-$10.95). All of these dishes are served with organic black beans and their house rice (essentially white rice with scallions). At the start of your lunch, you will also receive a basket of chips with a side of mild salsa. In addition, you have the option of getting their Tableside Guacamole ($11.95).

For dinner, you also receive chips and salsa and can order the Tableside Guacamole. The menu is broken into Appetizers (11 choices, $6.95-$14.95), Tacos al Besito (5 choices, $17.95-$20.95), Enchiladas Y Budin (5 choices, $17.95-$21.95), Platos Fuertes (12 choices, $17.95-$27.95) and Sides (6 choices at $4.95 each). Again, all of the main dishes are served with organic black beans and house rice. With most of the dishes costing $20 or less, it is an affordable location for many. And once you consider the quality of the dishes, then you realize it is a good value.

I was very pleased when I inquired about the sourcing of their seafood as much of it comes from domestic waters. For example, they sometimes get Striped Bass from Massachusetts or Long Island, as well as Red Snapper from the Gulf. In addition, they source their Shrimp from the Gulf, which makes me feel good.
Their red Sangria contains red wine, Cointreau, peach liquor, fresh fruit and juices and is very dark in color. I'm picky about my Sangria and this made the cut, as it was fruity but not too sweet, with some nice pieces of peach and apple. It is refreshing and makes an excellent summer drink.

The La Sandia Margarita ($12) is made from Organic Casa Noble blanco tequila, Cointreau, fresh watermelon, agave nectar, and fresh squeezed lime. With a prominent watermelon flavor, it also wasn't too sweet and the taste of the tequila was evident, enhancing the cocktail. A nice balance of flavors.
The **Market Margarita** ($13) didn't impress me as much. Made from Corzo reposado tequila, triple sec, agave nectar, pineapple juice, cilantro, jalapeño, and fresh squeezed lime, it had a prominent taste of pineapple with lots of cilantro bits. However, the tequila taste was nearly disguised and there wasn't sufficient spice from the jalapeño. It is a cocktail with potential, but needs a little tweaking.

I tasted a flight of Mezcal, including the **Los Amantes Joven**, **Los Amantes Reposado**, **Ilegal Joven** and **Ilegal Reposado**. All four are good, with that smokiness I love in Mezcal, but my favorite of the four was the **Los Amantes Reposado**. Two years ago, I reviewed this Mezcal, and highly recommended it, finding that it tasted just as excellent now as it did then. It would be a great choice if you are new to Mezcal. In the rear of the photo above, you can also see the cup of homemade Sangrita that came with the flight, which helps to cleanse your palate.
On the lunch menu, some of the soft and hard tacos are the same, while a couple others are only made one way. For example, **Carne Asada** only comes in a hard taco and they use **Adobo Chicken** in their soft tacos while they use **Tinga Chicken** in their hard tacos. For the hard tacos too, you can get a mix of three different types, but that option is not available for the soft tacos. I'm unsure why these differences exist.

Above is a photo of the **Mixtos Hard Tacos** ($12.95), which include Carne Asada, Pollo and Camarones. The **Carne Asada** includes grilled marinated skirt steak, shredded organic romaine lettuce, pico de gallo, chile de arbol salsa, and queso fresco. The **Pollo** has shredded tinga chicken, shredded organic romaine lettuce, queso Chihuahua, crema, and pico de gallo, while the **Camarones** has crispy shrimp, shredded organic romaine lettuce, pico de gallo, chipotle cream salsa, and queso fresco. The fillings overflow the tacos, though you can then use the chips to scoop it up.

The hard tacos had a fresh, crunchy corn taste. Of the three types, I probably liked the Camarones the best, enjoying the crunchy batter of the shrimp and the spicy kick probably due to the chipotle cream salsa. The Pollo though had plenty of moist and flavorful chicken, with a nice blend of spices, and was quite tasty. The Carne Asada was very good too, with delicious tender beef. The hard tacos are an excellent choice for lunch.

As for the soft tacos, the **Camarones** ($11.95) were also a winner, with plenty of crispy shrimp, shredded organic romaine lettuce, pico de gallo, chipotle cream salsa, and queso fresco. Each taco had two, soft tortillas and it was difficult to fit everything inside them. I really like the addition of the queso fresco to these tacos.
As for Appetizers, I love **Queso Fundido** ($8.95) so had to order it, and Besito makes a tasty dish, with baked queso Chihuahua, rajas, chorizo, cilantro, and white onion. They give you some small, warm tortillas with this dish. Melted cheese and chorizo is such a great combo, and this is an addictive appetizer.

The **Ceviche del Dia** (market price) changes dependent on what is available that day, and included Shrimp when I had it. It is accompanied by plantain and corn tortilla chips, and I really enjoyed the plantain chips, especially topped by some of the ceviche, which had a nice blend of citrus and spice. The shrimp was plump and plentiful, and the well-balanced flavors impressed. A highly recommended dish.

As for entrees, there are plenty of interesting choices so you might have some difficulty deciding on what to choose. The **Salmon Manchamanteles** ($22.95) has roasted salmon, crispy bananas, pineapple pico de gallo, and mole manchamanteles. With a nice presentation, the dish was absolutely delicious with a perfectly cooked piece of salmon, and a compelling sauce enhanced by the fruit flavors. Everything worked well, a harmonious plenty of excellent
tastes. Another highly recommended dish.

The **Enchilada Mixtas** ($19.95) are filled with skirt steak, grilled chicken, chorizo, guajillo cream salsa, sweet plantains, cilantro, and queso fresco. There was plenty of tender meat in the filling, and the flavorful sauce added a creamy texture to the enchiladas. Once again, the flavors were nicely balanced and everything seemed fresh.

You might want a **Side** with your entree, and my top recommendation would be the **Tamale de Elote**, a fresh corn tamale with chipotle chile cream, onion, cilantro, and queso fresco. A creamy, rich corn flavor, with hints of spice, made this a compelling dish, which will have you scraping the corn husk to ensure you get every tasty bit.

Another Side is the **Elotes de la Calle**, roasted corn with queso fresco & chile molido. With a smoky taste, enhanced by the queso fresco, this is another good choice.
For a little sweeter Side, try the **Platanos con Crema**, fried sweet plantains with crema and queso fresco. The plantains were cooked just right, with a bit of a crispy coating and a soft, moist interior, and their mild sweetness went well with the creaminess of the cream and queso. I've previously had too many overcooked plantains so these were a pleasant surprise.

You better make sure you save some room for **Dessert**, as this is another area where they excel. There are about five Dessert options, each for $7, and I enjoyed three of them, each enticing my palate. The **Pastel de Chocolate** is a devils food cake, layered with homemade whipped cream and strawberries, and topped with tres leches and a pomegranate cabernet syrup. A rich and moist chocolate cake, it was enhanced by the sweet homemade cream, fruit and mild but flavorful syrup. A great way to end your lunch or dinner.

The **Tres Leches** is a vanilla sponge cake marinated in citrus tres leches, with homemade whipped cream and fresh berries. Again, the cake was moist and the homemade whipped
The Pudin de Chocolate is a Mexican chocolate pudding topped with homemade whipped cream and served with buñuelos. Such a rich and creamy chocolate flavor, this will satisfy any chocolate lover. And the cinnamon/sugar covered "cookies" made dipping delicious. I would come to Besito just to enjoy their desserts.

At the end of your meal, your server will drop off a bag containing a warm churro, which I haven't been able to resist eating before I left the restaurant. You also receive a tiny worry doll, which you are supposed to place under pillow at night and it will take away all your worries.

Service is excellent, and it often is a team effort, with a primary main server. When you arrive, your server will greet you in Spanish, and they generally have a very pleasant attitude, being attentive without being obtrusive. My only minor complaint is that they have been trained to always ask if you want one of their house margaritas or the tableside guacamole. After multiple visits, that might start to be a little annoying.

Overall, Besito is doing great for a restaurant that has only been open for a month. The food is delicious, fairly priced and there is plenty of diversity so there should be something for everyone. Service is professional and attentive. There are limited options for Mexican cuisine in the Burlington area so Besito is a welcome addition. I'll definitely be returning and Besito earns a hearty recommendation.