Mexican cuisine has a bit of a reputation. Consumed hot and greasy from a neighborhood taco joint, juice dripping from your chin, it’s easy to appreciate its roots as a fast-and-cheap food. Granted, there’s also no shortage of homey Mexican restaurants on the Island, but many were born out of American preconceptions of ground beef and sour cream on a hard shell, rather than what one might see south of the border.
More recently, Long Island chefs and restaurateurs have been drawn to the complex flavors of authentic Mexican cuisine, often inspired by traditional dishes previously unknown to local palates. Even in the realm of fine dining, innovators are paying homage to our southern neighbor while adding their own creative twists. And while we’ll always hold a place in our hearts for the simple burritos of yore, these upscale eateries are winning us over with their sophisticated spins on our favorite foreign comfort food.

**Besito: Huntington and Roslyn**

*image: yvonne albinowski*

**Can’t Miss Dish:** Enchiladas de mole poblano  
**Origin:** Puebla, in east-central Mexico  
**What to Drink:** John Tunney’s favorite is Don Julio Reposado, served with a slice of lemon, maybe even a splash of ginger ale. “Not mixing it with all kinds of
things to hide the tequila.”

When John Tunney opened the first Besito nine years ago, he felt “the Mexican market was broken. Broken in the sense that the American version of a Mexican restaurant wasn’t a very good image. It was all kind of lumped together in one stereotypical view of what that restaurant might look or taste like.”

Legend has it that mole sauce originated at a convent in Puebla. When the archbishop paid a surprise visit, the nuns had to scramble to cook an impressive meal with whatever ingredients they had on hand. Image: Yvonne Albinowski

Tunney saw it as an opportunity for change. As the public’s palate shifted toward sophisticated and complex flavors, he thought the more traditional dishes of Mexico (a topic dear to his heart) were familiar enough to inspire adventurous eating, without feeling too foreign. “I think five years ago people thought Mexican was just a very simple cuisine where you had chicken and rice and a vegetable and some beans and a
tortilla. What’s happened is that people have now realized that it’s a lot deeper and a lot better than that. That would be like saying American cuisine is a hot dog, but it’s not. That’s one item on a big, big menu.”

In the past decade, Besito’s success has led to multiple locations opening across the US. Part of what makes this chain succeed is the complex natures of their salsas. South of the border, “salsa” refers to any sauce, not just a dip for chips. And at Besito, there’s over 30 of them, each lovingly and painstakingly crafted with dozens of native ingredients. For Tunney, that care and attention to detail is all a part of Mexican hospitality. Even the atmosphere at Besito is meant to reflect “an upscale hacienda,” like an inviting dinner party at home rather than dining at a restaurant. “The culture is so warm and so family-based, if you take that into the restaurant through training and the spirit of cooking, it’s beautiful,” Tunney said.

Del Fuego: St. James, Babylon and Patchogue
Can’t Miss Dish: Crispy red snapper Veracruz
Origin: The state of Veracruz, a coastal strip on the Gulf of Mexico
Key Ingredients: Skin-on red snapper filet in a sauce of roasted tomatoes, garlic, onions, cider vinegar, roasted habañeros, cinnamon, black pepper, ground cumin, ground coriander, sugar, Mexican oregano, green olives, capers and lime juice
What to Drink: Casa Del Fuego, with chile-infused El Jimador Tequila, passion fruit and strawberry purée, pineapple juice and Cointreau

Years ago, Tex-Mex faced some scorn as the much-maligned stepchild of classic Mexican food. But this bastard offspring has authentic roots of its own and enough history to earn its rightful place among the pantheon of American regional cuisines. When he opened the first Del Fuego in St. James, executive chef
and restaurateur Joe DeNicola knew that stretching the boundaries of Mexican cooking could offer a creative opportunity. “There is no real definition of Tex-Mex, so we get away with a little more. What we were really aiming to do was take the quality of Mexican food [on Long Island] up a notch. We try to play on using the best local ingredients and then add in fun elements.”

That playful approach is as apparent in the atmosphere as it is on the menu. “We tried to make it feel like a cantina and adorn the walls with great art. It's a light place that's a little escape,” DeNicola said. Diners feel as though they’re whisked away on a mini vacation, an aspect of eating out that’s rising in popularity. But the laidback vibe doesn’t mean the menu lacks serious culinary chops.

Classics are updated with inventive twists like guac with fresh mango and pineapple, enchiladas with BBQ
brisket and a Southwest spin on the Cobb salad. DeNicola said they don’t discriminate: “We’ll riff on traditional Mexican dishes. We’ll do our own take on Texas dishes...But the biggest thing is we’re not afraid to use spice.”

**Tocolo Cantina: Garden City**

![Image: Tocolo Cantina](image: yvonne albinowski)

**Can’t Miss Dish:** Braised short ribs au jus

**Origin:** French cooking techniques with Mexican flavors

**Key Ingredients:** Beef short ribs, Negra Modelo beer, cascabel chiles

**Know Your Chiles:** Cascabel, aka “rattle chile” due to its loose seeds, has a smoky and nutty flavor, perfect for simmering in stews or reduced in an au jus, like at Tocolo.

**What to Drink:** Boing! mango soda imported from
Mexico, made with real mango pulp

Don’t let Tocolo’s unassuming exterior fool you, the creative cuisine within is far beyond the average strip mall. Inside, the warm wood and tin-paneled walls mix with chic Mexican tiles for a modern, sophisticated setting. And executive chef Nelson Lopez certainly has a talent for imaginative Mexican fare. “As people learn more about the cuisine and become more familiar with the ingredients, we can use our expertise as innovative chefs to add the finesse to these dishes that are classically known...maybe even take a French technique and use Mexican ingredients, elevate the flavors to be more elegant.”

One of the ways Lopez achieves this is to experiment with lesser-known authentic additives, such as morita chiles or Oaxaca cheese. Even something as ubiquitous as the humble taco is open for interpretation. “Things like beautiful marinades for the meat or the ability to make your own fresh tortillas have taken the taco to the next level. It’s amazing how you can play around with so many different flavors together using a tortilla and some protein as a base.”
Recently, Lopez has noticed a push toward more seafood-based fillings, similar to those on the Yucatán peninsula, which along with Puebla, is one of his favorite regions for culinary inspiration. “They have so much history and things are being done the same way since the Mayan age. The way they marinate and prepare meat hasn’t changed for so many years.”

Verde Kitchen & Cocktails: Bay Shore
**Can’t Miss Dish:** Oaxacan style carne asada

**Origin:** The state of Oaxaca, among the mountains of southwest Mexico

**Key Ingredients:** Grass-fed skirt steak, roasted green onions and poblano peppers, fried plantains, guajillo chile, calavo avocados, lime juice, salsa roja, olive oil

**Secret Cooking Tool:** Comal, a flat griddle, typically made of cast iron

**Know Your Chiles:** Guajillo chiles are tied with ancho chiles as the most commonly used in Mexico. They are moderately hot and traditionally used to make sauce for tamales.

**What to Drink:** Michelada Tradicional, a beer cocktail with a splash of tomato, hot sauce and citrus juices served in a spiced rim glass. “It’s like a Mexican Bloody Mary.”

It’s impossible to talk about Verde without addressing
its namesake, the greenhouse. Peppers, herbs and other edibles line the walls of the rustic dining room where sunlight streams through the glass roof. The setting is indicative of the restaurant’s mission: to bring the fresh, sunny flavors of southern Mexico to Bay Shore. But when owner Anthony Tartaglia first opened Verde with his brother Andy, some customers were apprehensive toward the unfamiliar plates. “In the beginning, trying to educate some of the people on what we were doing was a little difficult…But nowadays with the rise of foodies and everything being a little bit on the higher end, there was a high demand for really authentic Mexican food.”

The dishes on Verde’s menu are inspired by both the mountainous Oaxaca region and the traditional tacos of Mexico City, both of which the Tartaglia brothers visited with chef Zach Rude on a research trip. In Oaxaca,
surrounded by stalls peddling everything from chiles to grasshoppers, Anthony was drawn to a corner of a mile-long marketplace by the smell of grilled meat. “You almost look around and think, ‘I don’t know if I want to eat here…’ But then you go into this one part of the market that’s filled with smoke. It’s just meat surrounded by all these different flavors.” In that market they discovered fried plantains with their hint of sweetness, unfamiliar chiles and calavo avocados, all of which play a major role in Verde’s take on the traditional.