

# The New York Times

Copyright © 2005 The New York Times

NEW YORK, FRIDAY, JANUARY 7, 2005

## Diner's Journal

Frank Bruni



Tina Fineberg for The New York Times

Danette Ott, left, and Heather Nelson try the guacamole tasting menu at Mercadito, in the East Village.

Among all there is to love about restaurants in this boundlessly creative city, what sometimes enchants me most is their through-the-looking-glass quality. In the space of a vestibule and three or four steps, they have the ability to transport you from a generically scruffy New York street to a distant, distinct wonderland on the other side of the wall, or perhaps I should say the mirror.

Mercadito, which opened in the East Village in September, takes you to a hacienda in Mexico. It takes you only partway there in the narrow front room, which is too busy and crowded to allow you much of a visual impression of it.

But in a larger, more appealing backroom, which opened last month, the ceiling has been set high enough, and the walls treated and painted in a fashion rough-hewn enough, to give you the feeling of sitting in an open-air courtyard south of the border. You could happily linger here a good long while, especially if you happened to be drinking one of the restaurant's special margaritas.

In a city of eight gazillion cocktail recipes, Mercadito has minted and executed a few memorable ones. Take a sip of the margarita de pepino, made with cucumber juice and chile de arbol. The flavors come in

two waves, a cool blast from the cucumber followed by a hot rush from the chile.

I mention the drinks because they seem integral to Mercadito, which chases a tone of festive rather than refined, right down to its brightly colored dishware: orange, green, blue. Nonchalant service contributes to the vibe, which is sometimes too loose and easy for its own good.

One server sat down next to us on a banquette to take our order. Another bobbed a plate of baked oysters as he put it on the table, so that the oysters ended up in one big, messy heap.

"There goes the presentation!" he laughed and wandered merrily away.

All of this distracts from the fact that the chef and owner, Patricio Sandoval, is a serious advocate of Mexican food who means to impress. Mr. Sandoval worked with his brother Richard at both Maya and Pampano, and he clearly wants to show off the cuisine of his ancestry as something simultaneously simpler and more nuanced than the mash of sour cream and salsa fresca that you get at a more mercenary place. He wants to exalt and experiment with it.

And so the menu includes three

kinds of guacamole: a traditional one; an alternately sweet and smoky one (my favorite) that mixes mango and chipotle; and another with pineapple, tomatillo and mint.

The menu also highlights a half-dozen kinds of ceviche, including one with shrimp, pineapple and coconut milk that was impossible to resist. Others had a slightly overbearing tartness that overwhelmed the taste of the fish, and the notes of sweet fruit in the mixes came rushing too emphatically to the fore.

Nearly a dozen kinds of tacos, which come three to an order, are made with fresh, soft tortillas that redeemed sometimes overcooked meat. Fried oysters on a bed of corn salsa were an unexpected treat. The baked oysters were tucked under a pleasantly salty quilt of manchego cheese and chorizo.

I wasn't in a Mexico I instantly knew. But I was in a neatly conceived niche of Manhattan that didn't feel instantly familiar. I rather enjoyed that, especially after my second margarita.

Mercadito, 179 Avenue B, between 11th and 12th Streets, East Village; (212) 529-6490. Appetizers and entrees, \$7.50 to \$13.50.