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By Matt Rodbard

Chef Julian Medina tops his tortillas with veal cheek & truffles

Julian Medina is a crafty chef, having landed two stars as chef de cuisine at Maya and later helping pen the original menu at SushiSamba (it takes guts to stand behind a yellowtail roll that combines such disparate ingredients as jalapeño and lemon-grass). But it's the lack of one particular ingredient at Toloache, his ambitious Mexican restaurant in the Theater District, that makes his cooking stand out.

In the over 15 dishes we sampled, not one featured the wet blanket condiment of choice at thousands of Mexican joints and Taco Hells: lettuce. Cool on a sandwich, essential in a salad, this shredded buzz kill has no place near a tortilla—and thankfully Medina has banished the produce from his Oaxacan-inspired kitchen.

And unlike splashier cantinas in the city, where \$17 margarita-fueled cackles and the Gypsy Kings fill the air, the cavernous location is cozy, with mosaic tiles and colorful pastorals lining the walls (but still sophisticated enough to sell their own \$17 reposados). This tidy compromise between upscale and traditional also translates to Medina's cooking.

Fresh truffles, Manchego cheese and sweet corn—ingredients that greatly range in price and world origin—make up the rich center of a quesadilla (\$13), which is fired within the restaurant's massive hearth, adding a pleasant smokiness and char. Guacamole (arriving without the embarrassing tableside mashing), is available in three varieties (\$11) with homemade corn chips stealing some thunder, and causing more, with an addictive crunch that left the basket at our table throughout the meal.

It is obvious that Medina knows how to accent a tortilla. Braised veal cheek tacos (\$9) are garnished with sweet onion and pack a salty crunch with each bite, while sweet corn tamales (\$10) are only tamales in theory—a light mesa cake is served separate from a heaping pile of chicharrones, rich pork fat pan-fried in more mole verde and its own fatty goodness.

With pride (and a 10-minute tourism bureau stump speech) the server mentioned that the chicharrones was a traditional Oaxacan dish, along with grasshopper tacos (\$9), a dare-worthy dish that tastes worse than it sounds. He even seemed a bit skeptical about the flavor of dried Orthoptera, but was nevertheless clear about its significant place in the southern Mexican kitchen.

To think this poor duck, who was force-fed gallons of corn mash, winds up as part of a taco. Julia Child is surely rolling over in her grave. The foie gras was seared properly, but was too big (each hunk was as thick as a plump Ballpark Frank) and bold to accompany a corn tortilla. The veal sweetbread taco (\$9) was a much better example of using trendy ingredients in traditional cooking. Small hunks of thymus go naturally with fresh sweet corn and smoky pasilla salsa.

The entrees, on the other hand, are outmatched by the small plates. Chicken enchiladas (\$20) lean sweet with a fig salsa and quince salad, while a brick-oven suckling pig (\$25) tasted mysteriously like the chicharrones—it was basically the same crunchy preparation with smoky pork piled high atop a tortilla, making the age of this swine a non-factor.

This is heavy, organy fare, but pastry chef Roberto Villamil makes dessert worth holding out for. An inventive Meyer lemon tres leches contrasts the simple, cinnamon-dusted churros. And who would have thought Patron XO worked with café con leche? It may just be common in the cantinas and coffeehouses of Huatulco. But we were left to wonder as our waiter had punched out for the evening.