



Toloache (say toh-lo-AH-tchay) is that rare Mexican restaurant that leaves the kitsch out completely and instead feels cool and modern, with walls lined in hand-painted blue and red Mexican tile and lighting from imported wrought iron lanterns that cast a soft warm light and give the space a vaguely Moroccan feel. There are two levels of dining: the lively street level, lined with roomy cream colored banquettes and filled with pairs drinking and dining at the ceviche and guacamole bar, and the more intimate upper level, filled with heavy wooden tables for four and lit with smaller flickering lanterns.

The restaurant is named from a flowering plant famed in Mexico for its use in love potions, and while they don't mention any essence of Toloache in their margaritas, they are also powerful love potions. (Go with someone you love and you'll love him more, go with someone you've just met, and, well, ditto.) There are four varieties served, including one made with fresh muddled blueberries and one with grapefruit, but my favorites were the regular fresh squeezed lime version, the De la Casa (\$10), and one made from lots of fresh lime juice with muddled cucumber and jicama that gives the drink a rounder, slightly less tart bite (\$12).

Have a round of drinks and an order of the chef's guacamole sampler (\$20 for three), while you look over the menu and make some decisions. The trio is sort of a Goldilocks experience, except in this case, all three offer wonderful but distinctly different rewards. You'll scoop into the first one and find diced apples, mangoes, and peaches mingling with the ripe chunks of avocado and diced habanero and marvel at how well the textures and flavors play together. You'll get into the second, and find your eyes may tear up at the wildly hot and smoky blend of chipotle, avocado, red onion and queso fresco, but you'll double dip with abandon. And then you'll dig into the last one and find a guacamole that's just right: a smooth and chunky mix of creamy avocado, with an ample dose of cilantro, Serrano chile, tomato, and red onion.

By the time your guacamole tasting is but a distant memory (I give you about 8 minutes to polish it off) you should have a game plan on what to order. Since the menu is quite large (ceviche, tacos, small plates, dishes from the brick oven, entrees and sides plus a great three course pre-theater menu at \$34 per person), allow me to recommend a game plan.

If you're a group of four, as we were, follow up that guacamole trio with a ceviche tasting (3 for \$20). The tuna was a wonderful surprise, a small ruby red dice of tuna in a sweet tart mix of key lime and watermelon juices with a jolt of chile heat and a shower of expertly julienned radish. The shrimp (plump and sweet) was more ordinary, but still quite impressive, resting in a puddle of sour orange and jicama with a litter of chives. The steak—which was sort of like a beef carpaccio Mexican style—was my favorite. Median serves sheer slices of rare seared grass-fed ribeye and smacks the beef with a fierce chipotle mustard and a garnish of cactus salad.

From the brick oven (left over from the former Italian restaurant in this space), Julian offers a cheesy fondue (\$10), a farm egg baked with corn tortillas beans, queso fresco and crema (\$8), and a selection of quesadillas. We tried the special quesadilla, topped with hamachi and Manchego cheese, but sadly it was the miss of the evening. The quesadilla is open-faced, covered with slices of hamachi and a bubbly quilt of Manchego cheese and it really didn't work for me. I'm not really a fan of fish and cheese. The textures were not appealing—I found the fish was quite mushy against the hot melted cheese.

There are a dozen tempting taco choices on Medina's menu, so this is the right place to let out your inner taco freak. They're the sort of tacos that remind me of something Calvin Trillin wrote in the New Yorker a few weeks ago about whether certain foods taste better standing up. In the case of tacos, I'd say the answer is yes. In my mind, they should be devoured in streetcart posture, torso slightly hunched forward to prevent excessive shirt staining, fingers working to keep the soft warm tortilla wrapped around the messy fillings, and the back of your free hand moving fast to wipe a trail of crema and salsa from your chin. Staying seated just feels odd, but it is a real restaurant after all so I guess as long as you're standing in your mind, you're okay.

Served on warm floppy crepe-like corn tortillas, the tacos come filled with everything from beautifully beer-battered hamachi (all puffed up like a fillet of fish from Chip Shop) topped with spicy jicama slaw and guacamole (\$9), to saucy braised veal cheeks with a hit of sassy chile de arbol salsa (\$9), and the Chapulines—the one taco that had the table uttering Craig's forbidden "interesting" in unison. Chapulines, for those who are not familiar with the term, are Oaxacan-style dried grasshoppers that are tucked into tacos and lavished with lime and jalapeno. "I like my grasshoppers wet, not dried" Craig said, smugly pretending to be some sort of cricket connoisseur. "Yes, Craig, I agree with you," Jim said. "I like mine with lots of soy sauce." We were all having a great time with the grasshopper jokes, but honestly, when they arrived they really weren't that scary. They aren't whole (they're diced up), and they don't have much taste other than lime and jalapeno. They are more a textural element—a crispy crunch—than a flavor component. But they're a fun fear factor dish and if you've got the nerve, they've got the 'hoppers.

You won't need any nerve to enjoy the sopas de requeson (\$9). What you will need is will power not to order seconds and then thirds. These might be my favorite dish on this menu. Medina takes warm silver dollar sized corn cakes (sopas) and tops each one with a spoon of Mexican ricotta cheese, a bit of salsa ranchera (red and medium spicy), and a perfectly fried sunny side up quail egg that covers the cakes with a bull's eye and brings to mind a Dr. Seuss illustration. These are one-bite morsels that give you a little sweet, a little hot, a little warm and a little cool, and you'll wish they took more like 3 or 4 bites to conquer. I'd just order more. The tamal de puerco (\$10) is good as well, but not quite as thrilling. It's filled with dense sweet masa and bathed in a zippy green mole with a rather odd side of ropey crisped up braised pork. I'd imagined the pork tucked inside the tamal, not as an accompaniment, where it seemed more of a random afterthought than an integral part of the dish. But other than that, I was game.

There are also a dozen entrees to choose from, including a seven-chile rubbed tuna with sautéed corn and chorizo (\$25), and a classic mole poblano made with farm-raised chicken breast (\$22). We had the organic salmon (\$24)—an ample fillet, cooked just right—pink and luscious on the inside, golden and buttery with a nice sear on the outside—served over a thicket of rich and earthy huitlacoche and maitake mushrooms in a gentle sauce made from zucchini flowers and fava beans. We added a side of avocado fries that were a fun alternative to the potato, I guess. There's a creaminess to them that makes their panko crust quite a nice contrast of texture, but I'd rather have the real thing. And of course, we shared the aforementioned brick-oven roasted suckling pig (\$25) that evoked the first mention of the D word. And yes it was. Damn, I think that's cheating. Oh well, I tried.

**When I checked my email the next morning, there was a note from Jim about our dinner at Toloache: "Andrea, I wanted to share some thoughts about dinner last night," he wrote. "I found Toloache to be delicious. The guac trio was most delicious. The ceviches were also delicious. The grasshopper tacos were interesting, but I could not say delicious. Sitting next to Craig was both interesting and delicious. In total, nothing was undelicious or uninteresting, everything at Toloache was interesting and delicious."**