

CRAIN'S

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Mexican Star Open Own Spot

By Bob Lape

Even during the stagehands' strike, the curtain went up nightly at Toloache, the new savory stage for Julian Medina, who has been a serial star-catcher for other owners before finally opening his own restaurant.

Toloache (pronounced toh-loh-AH-tchay) is named for a flowering plant famed in Mexico for its use in love potions. The name is typical of chef/partner Medina, who has shown both passion and intelligence in his previous assignments. These run from Hacienda de los Morales and Les Clibits in his native Mexico City to Maya, SushiSamba, Pampano and Zcalo in New York. He can do it all with flair and good taste.

Designer Welly Mai brings Mexico's vibrant colors to bear on Toloache's duplex setting. Perforated tin lanterns illuminate exposed brick walls and painted tiles. Ninety seats are divided between the first floor's guacamole and ceviche bar and wood-burning oven, and the more secluded if equally noisy balcony. Fifty guests look down on 30 people dining near the open kitchen. The place looks like fun and is.

More than a dozen types of chiles invite smokiness and/or heat to dishes prepared in an open kitchen. Meals can play out in three or four acts, if both ceviches and some of the strikingly original tacos are tackled first. Well, perhaps the logical approach to Toloache would be to mix margaritas or some of the large tequila selection with a trio of guacamole styles. That shouldn't count as a course, should it?

Ceviches (\$10 to \$17) may be ordered in flights of three (\$27) or five (\$42). These may be picked from six seafood beauties such as organic salmon belly with tomatillo, lime and serrano peppers, or a meaty option—seared rare rib-eye with chipotle mustard and cactus salad.

A dozen tacos sparkle with imagination. Foie gras with mango salsa, braised brisket or beef tongue, caramelized veal cheeks or sweetbreads, and hamachi with spicy jcama slaw are among them.

When chapulines (dried grasshoppers) were proposed, I tried evasion. Asking my three compaeros if they would like to try grasshoppers, I was stunned to hear them all say, "Si!" The good news: They are only a texture—dried and crispy, Oaxacan-style with jalapeo, lime and sauted onion, which provide the flavor notes.

The brick oven sends forth five-cheese fondues for filling tortillas, or innovative quesadilla contents such as Manchego cheese, corn, black truffles and huitlacoche salsa. The restaurant's grilled octopus is another winner, simmered with stewed tomatoes, chiles, olives and capers and presented with a squid ink pasilla salsa.

Colder weather enhances the impact of beef short ribs braised in a medley of pomegranate and tequila, glazed with ancho peppers and served with celery root puree. In all seasons, chef Medina's brick oven-roasted suckling pig weighs in mightily. Its accents are habanero-sour orange salsa and a salad of avocado, cactus and crunchy chicharrones. Other exceptional entrees are seven-chile-rubbed tuna with a tequila-chipotle glaze, and a farm-raised chicken breast clad in rich mole poblano.

Other than anemic chocolate dipping sauce for churros, desserts exceed expectations. Meyer lemon balances the sweetness of tres leches cake. Layers of crepes interwoven with mezcal-laced almonds and caramelized goat's milk play perfectly off banana ice cream, and warm Mexican chocolate cake gets the perfect sidekick of dulce de leche ice cream.

Toloache's service crew manages the ambient noise challenge very well, delivering helpful explanations and tips audibly. The short wine list is counterweighted by the long roster of tequilas.