



REAL TENOCHTITLAN IS THE REAL DEAL

Holy Mole

By Michael Nagrant

GENO BAHENA IS LIKE THE BOY WHO CRIED WOLF, OR, MORE particularly, the chef who cried “mole.” Every time Bahena, the executive chef of the new Logan Square regional Mexican spot Real Tenochtitlan, opens a new restaurant, he calls up the food-gossip mafia and regales them with tales of his famous mole sauce. Then he swears up and down that his latest venture is his greatest and that he’ll stick around forever. Then he disappears.

Though he’s opened about as many lauded restaurants as Michael Phelps has Olympic gold medals, Bahena has also closed more than the Chicago Health Department in an active week. Still, he always gets another opportunity. Genius has always been given a wide berth—just ask Phelps, who escaped a 2004 DUI arrest with probation. Bahena’s less like Phelps, though, and more like Mike Tyson. As great as he was, he’s finally exhausted the leniency of the public. Now when Bahena opens a restaurant most people start the taking bets on the closing date.

We just didn’t need him anymore. While he was out planning other ventures, his mole mentor, his mom, and his brother-in-law, opened the West Side spot Sol de Mexico. They were making good mole and more importantly they’d stayed open for two years. And so I swore I wouldn’t check out Real.

But the thing is, I was one of the last true believers in Tyson; after jail, and even after he bit Holyfield’s ear. I could never quite shake the memories of watching the 19-year-old bull, the legendary Kid Dynamite-era Tyson who destroyed grown men by knockout, many in a round or less. Even today, now that I know he’s a total whack-job, some part of me wants the old Iron Mike to return. Part of the nostalgia stems from the fact that Tyson’s heir, Lennox Lewis, was a snore. Lewis bear-hugged men into submission with his expansive reach and then landed weak knockouts.

In my mind, Bahena became too much like Tyson, and old images of the glorious culinary champ obscured the wash-up he’d likely become. Sol de Mexico wasn’t exactly Lewis, but, compared with my memories of eating airy corn-perfumed sopos in the grand dining room of Chilpancingo during Bahena’s reign, Sol seemed like a quaint storefront imitator. And so, as a true believer and a sucker for legend, I didn’t last a week before I caved and checked out Real Tenochtitlan.

Real was no suffocating storefront space masquerading as a restaurant. Walking in to the soaring dining room at Real, surveying the field of wooden tables outfitted with hammered-copper charger plates, and walls lined with fierce Mexican folk art and mirrors so large they’d be at home in the Palace of Versailles, I was sure the champ was back. Just in case I doubted it, there was also a huge portrait of a young Bahena lording over the dining room.

Service-wise, our waiter spotted the cooler strapped to my back (Real is BYOB for now), brought out an ice bucket for my beer, and hooked my 17-month-old son up with a sippy-cup of water before we even asked. Another server greeted the patrons at the table next to us by name, because he’d remembered them from his time at Tepatlulco.

We ordered a complement of appetizers including marlin sevice and the sopos. The sopos, especially the earthy, spicy chorizo and woodland-mushroom-topped version, were as good as I remembered. The marlin sevice was day-old funky and the lime marinade had ruined the texture of the fish, creating a sea of mush. Score one for Sol de Mexico, whose similar sevice is always fresh and firm.

The entrees, though, reminded us why we were there. The Borrego en Mole Negro, featuring succulent medium-rare lamb chops swimming in a pool of mahogany mole made of chilhuacle chiles had a deep, sweet, spice perfume. The mole at Real was more layered than the similar mole at Sol de Mexico. It was also perfectly salted, a frequent mole shortcoming. When our table ran out of fresh housemade tortillas, I used the now-bare lamb chop bones to ladle up the rest of the sauce.

Likewise the celadon-colored pumpkin-seed butter, Serrano chili, sour cream and cilantro-infused sauce splashing under plump, garlic, perfectly marinated grill-marked scallops on another dish, was subtle enough to allow the briny butteriness of the scallops through while lending a grassy spice to the dish’s finish.

Bahena was on. And when he’s on, he does it just about as good as anyone in Chicago, including Frontera Grill. Bahena’s a real chef, a culinary-school-trained guy, who understands layering, seasoning and flavor. He’s not some recreational cook or even a sun-wrinkled grandmother who’s good at home-style cooking. Sol de Mexico is good, but Real is great. Now, Bahena just needs to keep his eye on the prize, because as any student of boxing knows, plodding as he was, Lennox Lewis eventually knocked Mike Tyson out.

Real Tenochtitlan is located at 2451 North Milwaukee, (773)227-1050.

READINGS

THU/21

Anna Winger

The author discusses her latest novel, “This Must Be The Place.”
The Book Cellar, 4736 N. Lincoln, (773)293-2665. 7pm. Free.

Domnica Radulescu

The author discusses “Train to Trieste.”
Women and Children First Bookstore, 5233 N. Clark, (773)769-9299. 7:30pm. Free.

FRI/22

→ **Orphan Schlitz III**

For an evening of assertive despondency, you need not look further than the Orphan Schlitz Reading Series, which continuously finds new ways to make your life seem great by comparison. (All with good humor, of course.) Tonight features readings of short stories and poetry with appearances by local author Dan Gleason, author Ted McClelland (“Horseplayers: Life at the Track”) and tonight’s host, series founder Marc Arcuri, who I personally know pretty well and of whom I can say is completely authentic in his verbose misery. Self-doubt, misanthropy, addiction, self-deprecation, rage: put it all in the pint, shake it up and take it down. Look for lots of indifference and references to hypothetical dates with Winona Ryder. (Tom Lynch) Quimby’s, 1854 W. North, (773)342-0910. 8pm. Free.

→ **Printers’ Ball**

The fourth annual Printers’ Ball, Chicago’s premier literary event of the year, serves as a showcase for a wide array of local publications—and the best part...everything is free. Hosted by Poetry magazine, Newcity and the Museum of Contemporary Art, the evening offers samples from just about every alt-weekly, magazine, literary journal, bookstore and publishing house you can think of, including Stop Smiling, Venus Zine, MAKE, Another Chicago Magazine, Green Lantern, Featherproof Books, Milk Magazine, Lake Claremont Press, Chicagopoetry.com, Lumpen, Quimby’s and much, much more. Also on the docket: live music from Pure Magical Love, Stagecoach and DJs Logan Bay, Dustin Drase and Greg Gaffud, “Killing Him: A Radio Play,” an installment of the Dollar Store reading series and screen-printing demonstrations from Mat Daly. Not scheduled this year: cops spoiling all the fun. (Tom Lynch) Museum of Contemporary Art, 220 E. Chicago, (312)787-7070, ext. 8005. 5:30pm-10pm. Free.

SAT/23

Guild of Outsider Writers

Featuring Justin Hyde, David Blaine, Pat King.
Quimby’s, 1854 W. North, (773)342-0910. 6pm. Free.

MON/25

Adrienne Pine

The anthropologist discusses “Working Hard, Drinking Hard: On Violence and Survival in Honduras.”
Quimby’s, 1854 W. North, (773)342-0910. 7pm. Free.



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