



Mercadito

RATING: ★★★

108 W. Kinzie St., 312.329.9555
Lunch Mon.-Sat. 11:30AM-3PM;
Brunch Sun. 11:30AM-4PM;
Dinner Sun.-Mon. 5PM-
midnight; Tues.-Thurs. 5PM-1AM;
Fri. 5PM-2AM; Sat. 5PM-3AM.

What the stars mean:

★ = fair, some noteworthy qualities;
★★ = good, above average;
★★★ = very good, well above norm;
★★★★ = excellent, among the area's best;
★★★★★ = world-class, extraordinary
in every detail. Reviews are based on multiple
visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall
reaction to food, ambience and service.

WHAT TO WEAR: *Something tight
and shiny.*

WHAT TO ORDER: *Grenada
guacamole, carne asada tacos,
horchata flan.*

WHEN TO GO: *Buzzing
weekend nights.*

WHAT TO KNOW: *The Double A bar
below the restaurant employs some
of Chicago's hottest mixologists,
including Jennifer Contraveos.*

WHO GOES: *Wealthy young parents
and swinging singles.*

WHAT IT COSTS: *Appetizers
\$4.50-\$13.50; entrées \$19-\$25;
desserts \$5.*

Game Changer

Forget Tex Mex: With glam River North newcomer Mercadito, it's sexy Mexican fare paving the way to success | *By Michael Nigrant | Photography by Anthony Tablier*

What we have here, with the opening of gourmet Mexican digs Mercadito in River North, is a straight-up appleraid. Though there's no real word for when New York City restaurateurs descend upon Chicago—to la David Burke (Primehouse) and Marcus Samuelsson (C-House, Marc Burger)—and raid the business of locals, the term appleraiding, similar to carpetbagging, seems apropos. And call me provincial, but to me, any appleraider who wants to succeed here really need to bring it.

One way to earn respect is to unveil an original concept. Thanks to Rick Bayless, the Eminem of Mexican cooking, Chicago has no shortage of authentic south-of-the-border options. However, the Sandoval brothers, owner/operators of Mercadito's three locations in Manhattan and now, one spot on Kinzie Street, sling a much different breed of regional Mexican food. Theirs is a world of slick, chocolate leather accents and chocolatey mole, graffiti murals and glam guacamole, where the whole restaurant sizzles like a Chili's fajita platter.

On the Saturday night I visit, there are no baby backs in sight—just the ribbed pullovers of muscular men. The ambient alt-rock beats, rustic rope lanterns and pretty cocktails are to mascara-slathered ladies what the lavender halo of a bug zapper is to the common mosquito. The Sandovals (owner Alfredo, owner Felipe and chef/owner Patricio) have invented a new culinary genre: Sex-Mex.

Even the tacos—including the juicy rosemary skirt steak with cactus, and tender chicken smothered in mole with sweet plantains—are sexy here. The only thing that's not, really, is a surprisingly significant smattering of \$600-plus strollers taking up aisle space. But newborn cries turn out to be no problem, for they're drowned by the cacophony of clinking glasses and the buzz of babbling bachelors and bachelorettes.

One of those bachelorettes, a waifish sort crowned with a mess of black ringlets and shrugging off a flimsy dress strap, is the doppelgänger for Susanna Hoffs of '80s girl group The Bangles. The unfortunately named cocktail "Big Nose Goes to Mexico," sporting a spit of

FIRED UP *Clockwise from top left: The "Big Nose Goes to Mexico" flaming cocktail; Mercadito's dining room; estilo bajo tacos with beer-battered mahimahi, Mexican-style coleslaw and chipotle aioli. Below: Dorado ceviche with mahimahi, avocado, tomato and orange-chile de arbol broth.*





“Almost every drink here, including the smoky, silky Tres Coops—featuring single-village mezcal, St. Germain elderflower liqueur, lime and egg white—is as balanced and interesting as a Mary Lou Retton gymnastics routine.”



From top: Mercadito's décor features rope lanterns and party-sized booths; organic chicken braised barbacoa style.

flaming liquor, is burning like an eternal flame in front of her. While she sucks down the drink, she picks at her calabaza guacamole, studded with cinnamon-spiced pumpkin, grilled chile serrano and morita-scented pumpkin seeds, for almost an hour. I understand. That dish, a heavy mash-up of pumpkin pie and avocado, is cloying. If she'd opted for the Grenada-flavored version, brightened up with bursting pomegranate and zingy pico de gallo, she'd be shooting that glass dish of guac like it were Cuervo.

I'm rooting for her to order some tacos. She should experience the sweet, earthy blanket of sauce covering moist shreds of chicken on the mole-flavored ones, or the pine-scented bites of rosemary-marinated skirt steak, piled with tangy cactus and crispy wisps of fried potatoes, on the carne asada tacos. I love both, though not the tacos al pastor—the chile de arbol sauce is too salty. And it's tough to try them all, since the restaurant doesn't allow patrons to mix flavors on the four tacos that come with each order.

At \$13.50 for the Smurf-sized tortillas, you'd

figure there'd be a little leeway, but our server crosses his arms, shakes his head and stands his ground like a fierce Aztec warrior. Really, he's been unhelpful most of the night. When we ask him to recommend a couple of the 10 cocktails on Mercadito's list, he asks what our “profile” is. I'm pretty sure he's not inquiring about my Facebook page, so I ask him to clarify. He says, “Are you spicy, sweet or smoky?” It turns out he's talking about my flavor preferences. When my friend answers “sweet,” he recommends half the drink list.

The incredible thing is, you can't really go wrong. Almost every drink here—including the smoky, silky Tres Coops, featuring single village mezcal, St. Germain elderflower liqueur, Domaine de Canton ginger liqueur, Averna, lime and egg white—is as balanced and interesting as a Mary Lou Retton gymnastics routine.

By the time the waiter has put the kibosh on mixing tacos, I'm already straw-deep in my second drink, the island-dream-conjuring El Pirata (El Jimador blanco tequila, pineapple, spices, chilis, cerveza). With every sip of fizzy beer and pineapple comes a waft of fragrant cinnamon, and there isn't enough tension left in my body to hold any kind of grudge. Besides, we're three hungry diners with plenty of appetite to order multiple taco platters, not to mention the piping hot baked oysters oozing with sweet Manchego cheese, whose richness is smartly foiled by the spicy slash of chorizo and chipotle aioli.

The Sandovals overdo it, though, on a stuffed poblano pepper bursting with scallops, shrimp and octopus drowned in Oaxaca-Manchego cheese blend. With the chili pepper standing in for the tortilla, this is the Mercadito version of a gut-punching burrito as big as your head. The whole plate needs a spritz of lime to lighten the load.

Thankfully for our bursting bellies, the dessert selection is very limited. But at the same time, it seems odd that a restaurant with 50-plus savory options only offers three types of flan (horchata, goat's milk caramel and Mexican vanilla) for dessert. We choose the caramel and the horchata, both of which are lush, creamy and devoid of the cheap gelatin jiggle found in lesser flan. The same cannot be said for some of the more, ahem, enhanced ladies standing near the bar.

Despite the few kitchen and service inconsistencies, Mercadito is probably the first place in the city that offers above-average, authentic Mexican flavors while doubling as a Kardashian sister-worthy spot to party. On drinks and fun alone, there ain't nothing hostile about this takeover. ■