



diningout

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FUSION WHIZW
 Chef/owner Carlos Gaytan sits at the bar last month at Mexique, his Mexican/French fusion restaurant on West Chicago Avenue. | RICHARD A. CHAPMAN-SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

STAR SEARCH

Newly Michelin-starred Mexique needs to up the ante

“Your father must have been a thief, because somebody stole the stars and put them in your eyes.”

—Unknown

I didn't always pay attention in high school Spanish. But when we got to *piropos*, a k a the Spanish equivalent of cheesy American pick-up lines, I became an apt pupil. Many *piropos* were crude or ridiculous, but the one at left (I can't remember the Spanish translation) always resonated with me. It's absurd, sure, but it also has a romantic literary quality I liked. A few

weeks ago, while dining at Mexique, a French/Mexican fusion spot in West Town, I couldn't get this particular *piropo* out of my brain. The Michelin guide had recently awarded Mexique its first star. But while the place was decent, my experience was that Mexique's acquisition of that star was a touch larcenous.

I don't want to suggest that Mexique's chef/owner Carlos Gaytan (formerly Union League Club, Bistrot Margot) isn't a star. He is. In a world riddled with crude Tex-Mex chimichangas and burritos as big as your head, his plates are ephemeral delicacies.

Fusion food is often confusing



This trio of Sopes manages a difficult feat, successfully merging French techniques with Mexican flavors. The appetizer includes escargots, shrimp Provençal with avocado mousse and sweet plantains.



The Tartara de Carne appetizer features beef tartar, caper guacamole, poached eggs in truffle oil and crustini bread.

food that dishonors the parent cuisines. But Gaytan's trio of sopes is a seamless merging of French technique and Mexican ingredients. Tender escargot swim in garlicky chimichurri whose spice and limey zest transcend the heavy, garlicky, buttery French standard for snails. Sweet plantains dusted with young coconut draped in a chocolate mole sauce are swaddled in crackling French pastry-like sope crust. Shrimp Provençal often is a battle for supremacy between garlic and fennel, but those flavors meld harmoniously into a creamy gable of avocado mousse here. The plate only needs a touch more salt on the escargot.

Tartara de Carne is a silky pile of minced beef lacquered in the glinting breached yolk of a truffle-perfumed poached egg. The only problem here is a parsimony of grilled crustini on which to pile the tartare; I'm forced to spoon the beef directly in my mouth after I run out.



In the Mar y Tierra dish, hibiscus braised pork belly on braised red cabbage is joined by a trio of creamy, well-caramelized scallops.

The *pescamal*, a seafood mousse steamed in banana leaves and topped with a briny sweet fricassee of pulled crab meat, has cloud-like textures and bursting salty citrus notes from a garnish of lemon confit. But such delicateness is almost undermined by a sauce of sour, acidic tomato.

It's not the minor adjustments needed that I mind, as much as these plates are sort of a “greatest hits” collection that should already be perfected. They have been served pretty much since Mexique opened four years ago. Great restaurants used to change menus seasonally. In 2012, great restaurants like *Avec* and *North Pond* (notably and lamentably starless), sometimes change menus daily. Gaytan needs to be more inventive or he risks becoming a nostalgia act.

I've always seen Michelin-starred restaurants as destinations with superlative service and inventive cuisine for which you make no small plans to visit. And yet because you always get the same thing, Mexique is more of a solid neighborhood spot.

But even that is at risk. A solid neighborhood restaurant is a place where the servers are compatriots who know just how much tequila you need in your Margarita. At Mexique, my server never tells me of the specials. I only know there are specials because I overhear another server talking about them. My server disappears between the second and third courses just

as my cocktail is running dry. He does not return with a requested drinks menu until I am digging in to that third course. I wave him off, for the red wine I was planning with the duck leg confit would not go well with dessert. Another reason I skip the drink is because I've lost confidence in the entire drinks program.

An earlier glass of sangria has a uniform tiny dice (suggesting a detailed prep cook) of fruit, but it tastes nothing of wine, only of cloying hibiscus flower.

Hibiscus is used quite well as a haunting essence in a rich,

soulful braise of pork belly sitting on a fabulous thatch of crispy red cabbage. This plate, dubbed *Mar y Tierra* (land and sea), also includes a nice trio of creamy, well-caramelized scallops.

On second thought, as I chewed on the next entree, the mealy duck leg confit riddled with too much cranberry and tamarind sourness, I could really have used a drink, even sangria Kool-Aid, to wash it down.

Dessert, too, is disappointing. A duo of “enchiladas” (rolled crepes) are soggy, tasting as if they'd been prepared hours earlier, though the ancho-chocolate fondue coating on the crepes had a nice toasted quality.

Despite the consistent inconsistency at Mexique, I must note, there was one server (not mine) at Mexique I couldn't take my eyes off of most of the night. He returned poorly plated presentations to the kitchen. He wiped the edges of every one of his plates of errant sauce dots. At one point he smelled a guest's tartare before delivering it, noticed it was devoid of the promised truffle oil funk and gave it back to the kitchen for a final spritzing before delivery. I suspect if there is a thief in the midst at Mexique; this is the guy who maybe waited on a certain Michelin Inspector earlier this year.

Michael Nagrant is a local freelance writer. E-mail the Sun-Times Dining section at diningout@suntimes.com with questions and comments.

KEY: ★★★★★ Extraordinary;
 ★★★★ Excellent;
 ★★★ Very Good; ★ Good;
 Zero stars: Poor