

eat&drink



A variety of dishes off the winter menu at Rojo Gusano. KAITLYN MCQUAID PHOTO FOR REDEYE

By Michael Nigrant | FOR REDEYE

"They asked me what they should change. I said everything," said Dudley Nieto, chef and partner of Rojo Gusano.

Nieto's response wasn't intended to insult the Moreno family, who asked for his advice when looking to update their Albany Park restaurant, Mayan Sol Latin Grill. Rather, the roving chef, who's made a career opening a bunch of traditional and modern Mexican spots in Chicago including Adobo Grill, Chapuline, La Fonda del Gusto and Zapatis-ta, was ready for something new.

"I love Indian, Thai, Korean," Nieto said. "I travel a lot and have experienced so many global influences. I was ready to reflect that in what I did next." These ideas opened a dialogue between the Morenos and Nieto, which eventually led to the reconceptualization of Mayan Sol to Rojo Gusano—named for the red worm found at the bottom of some mezcal bottles.

In some ways, Rojo Gusano is Big Star's bro-tastic beach bum cousin from Baja, Calif., who brings bourbon, globally influenced tacos and a surfboard to the family reunion.

Octopus-shrimp ceviche and empanada portobello

\$8.50 and \$3, respectively, at Rojo Gusano, 3830 W. Lawrence Ave. 773-539-4398

WORTH A TRIP

It's a laid-back spot with \$2 taco Tuesdays and Wednesday night movies, where I caught the end of a Bruce Lee flick and munched on free housemade kettle corn. A kitschy film followed in which a buxom woman shook her derriere while my friends and I chowed down on guajillo chili-braised short rib tacos spiked with citrus-centric salsa and spicy radish. The whole scene reminded me a bit of a whiskey-soaked night at Delilah's in Lincoln Park.

The tacos here feature fluffy griddled-to-order tortillas that smell like freshly picked sweet corn. I hate how so many taquerias overcompensate for the flimsiness of their tortillas by double-wrapping them to stand up to the filling. Rojo Gusano's tortillas are much more substantial. My favorite taco featured creamy curls of shrimp slathered

with bright Thai green curry topped with a nest of crunchy Napa cabbage (\$3.50 each or \$10 for three). I also loved the arrachera taco (\$3.50 each or \$7.50 for three) stuffed with juicy nuggets of freshly grill-caramelized carne asada dripping with garlicky mojo de ajo sauce.

While the tacos are good (some of them could have used more salt, though not the arrachera or green curry camaron), there are two particular dishes I'd drive miles for. The first is an octopus and shrimp ceviche (\$8.50). A lot of Mexican ceviches tend to sit around with the fish turning to mush under the harsh acidity of lime juice. But Nieto draws on Peruvian influences here and tosses the shrimp and octopus with lime, yellow chili pepper paste and sweet and sour tamarind at the time of order. He throws in some mon-

ster toasted cancha corn (think Corn Nuts on steroids) for crunch and a tiny half dome of sweet potato. The sauce was bright, fresh and zingy, but the flesh of the seafood was firm and had a satisfying chew.

Though there's plenty of meat and seafood on offer at Rojo Gusano, my absolute favorite plate was an empanada stuffed with creamy farmer's cheese, epazote leaf and roasted portobello mushrooms (\$3). The half-moon-shaped shell dappled with flaky pockmarks from the fry oil was a killer pastry. A house-made chimichurri dip served on the side burst with a vinegar bite and the slow burn of red chili flake. The empanada mixed well with a smoky, sweet and bitter Oaxaca mule cocktail (\$9), a Latin riff on a Moscow mule featuring fernet, mezcal, cherry puree, ginger beer and lime. After a few sips and a bite of the empanada, I could envision myself in Argentina drinking in the coastal air of Buenos Aires, which I imagine is the kind of journey Nieto hoped to inspire.

MICHAEL NAGRANT IS A REDEYE CONTRIBUTOR. REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED, AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE.