



The manganada yogurt parfait.

TEXICAN DOES TEX-MEX PROUD

CHEF KIM DALTON HITS THE SWEET SPOT OF FUSION COOKING

By Michael Nagrant | FOR | REDEYE

Everything I know about Tex-Mex cuisine, I learned from Chi-Chi's. That a now-defunct (in the U.S.) chain founded in Richfield, Minnesota was a source of Mexican culinary inspiration is weird, I know. But because of Chi-Chi's, guys like Rick Bayless had to explain why they didn't serve free chips and salsa at their authentic regional Mexican restaurants. For a Michigan kid like me, the only thing greater than free chips and salsa was endless Cheddar Bay biscuits at Red Lobster.

I used to go to Chi-Chi's after homecoming dances with my high school posse, and my wife and I had our first date at the Ann Arbor Chi-Chi's. The chain still dishes up sizzling fajita platters in the United Arab Emirates, Belgium, China and Luxembourg. Someday, I will book a plane ticket to Belgium to relive my youth, but for now, I am only left with pasty Chi-Chi's brand grocery salsa to go with chips made by Hormel. Given all this, when I heard about Texican, a new spot where "Tex meets Mex" opening in West River North, I had visions of enchiladas dancing in my head.

The chef

Texican's owner and chef Kim Dalton, formerly of the now defunct Fulton Market cult hot spot Dodo, is a self-taught cook.

"I really learned from my mom," Dalton said. "She was really strict with the sweets, but if we helped her in the kitchen we might be able to score a batch of brownies in the deal. She'd halve recipes and we'd learn to do the math to make them."

Her mother was Korean and her father was a "Swedish Irish Bostonian," and Dalton grew up with all kinds of interesting ingredients.

"I had a friend over once, and there was

an octopus in our sink. My friend freaked out a little and told everyone about it at school. I was mortified," Dalton said.

Though she doesn't hail from Texas or Mexico, Dalton isn't half-assing some kind of bastardized Ladies Home Journal version of Tex-Mex.

"When we did Mexican at Dodo, people loved it," she said. "I love it. It's so comforting. So I read a lot and studied the cuisine. I'm not doing cream of mushroom soup King Ranch casserole, which was a Lady

Bird Johnson recipe back in the day. Ours has tomato, red pepper, chicken stock and a little masa for thickening."

REVIEW

Texican

869 N. Larrabee St.

312-877-5441

★★

The food

Indeed, the Texican King Ranch casserole (\$8.50) is like a light Mexican lasagna. Rather than a gloppy creamy mess, it features crispy layers of El Milagro tortilla sandwiching silky tendrils of braised chicken breast redolent with sour cream and cheddar tang. It has a soulful carb-infused comfort that satisfied my Chi-Chi's yearnings.

Tacos feature flaky toasted quesadilla-like tortilla shells stuffed with plump butterflied Gulf shrimp (\$9.95 for two) swimming in chipotle crema topped off with onion, cilantro and a side of limey



Texas red chili with cheddar cheese, sour cream and scallions.

neon pink slaw. There are also breakfast tacos (\$3 each) overflowing with creamy scrambled egg curds and salty bits of queso fresco. Red and green table salsas at many Mexican spots are often oversalted, chili-riddled liquids that sear your tongue. But the ones at Texican, a creamy green chili and spicy but not overpowering red, are complex and balanced.

There are very few great chilis served in or near Chicago, even though if a corner shack pours it from a tin can into a warmer, the joint will declare that their chili is Chicago's award-winning best ever. My favorite until now has been Chuck's Red from Chuck's Southern Comfort's Cafe in Burbank, Illinois. But thank the lord for Dalton's version (\$6 cup; \$7.50 bowl) which has a heady spice islands perfume—the result of toasting pasilla, guajillo, ancho and New Mexico chiles, blending them with fresh ground top round and throwing in some cumin, coriander and a funky touch of fish sauce. The bowl is topped with an island of sour cream, plump scallion rounds and tangles of shredded cheddar. A complimentary bag of Fritos is supplied for crunchy garnish. It is truly the best bowl of chili I have had in Chicago.

The drink

Coffee freaks will appreciate the fresh-brewed La Colombe on offer, while soda and juice enthusiasts can have their fill of Mexican Coke or Boing! Juice, which packs an explosion of mango flavor.

Dessert for breakfast

Though not Tex or Mex, the French Toast bread pudding (\$7.50), featuring baked croissants oozing with bright lemon curd,



King Ranch casserole, a baked chicken enchilada topped with avocado crema and pico de gallo.

fat blueberries and a vanilla-bean-spiked creme anglaise will fulfill all your sweet dessert and brunch fantasies.

Bottom line

Fusion cooking is often confusion cooking, but chef Kim Dalton of Texican has found a sweet spot melding the best of Texas and Mexico at Texican. Her food is nourishing, comforting and a bright spot in what has become a bit of a food desert following the closing of Japonais, Brasserie Ruhlmann and others. I used to work a few blocks away from Texican. If I still worked there, I'd probably drop by every day. Of course, Texican isn't Chi-Chi's. It's better.

Michael Nagrant is a RedEye freelancer. Reporters visit restaurants unannounced and meals are paid for by RedEye.

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