

THE ESSENTIALS

UPPING YOUR CHICAGO RESTAURANT CRED ONE BITE AT A TIME



Cemita milanesa sandwich
JOE GRAY/TRIBUNE

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

He drips with sweat. Customs officials rifle through his suitcase at the Mexico City airport. They're looking for contraband, drugs and weapons. All they find is a Nintendo, Air Jordans and some socks.

Tony Anteliz, the owner of Humboldt Park's celebrated Cemitas Puebla restaurant, left the house at midnight and fought his way to O'Hare through falling snow. He has a 104-degree fever. He wants to crawl into bed but instead catches a plane to Mexico City at 2 a.m. (because it's the cheapest fare he can find). His suitcases are filled with packages (the Jordans, etc.) from Mexicans living in Chicago. He brings these packages to his uncle, who distributes them to the Chicago transplants' families in Mexico. In exchange, Anteliz's uncle hands him a trove of hand-made mozzarella-like string cheese, queso Oaxaca from the town of Chipilo, located in the state of Puebla, and leathery morita chipotle chilis from Oaxacan street markets. Anteliz turns around, returns through customs, flies back and lands in Chicago at 2 p.m.

Anteliz makes this trip every six weeks. "I wish I could find these ingredients locally," he said. "I've tried, but they never taste the same." He often heads straight from the airport to the restaurant to do some more work, mixing the chilis with tepache, a fermented pineapple brine, to make chipotle sauce for his tacos arabe (\$2.75), which feature spit-roasted pork shoulder marinated in garlic, oregano and chilaca and serrano chilis, all nestled in a thick pita-like tortilla.

CEMITAS PUEBLA

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Looks like: The United Nations. Head over around lunch and you'll find a cross-section of Chicago, all breaking cemita bread.

Smells like: Spit-roasted garlic- and onion-spiked meat

Sounds like: The clank of spatulas dancing on a flattop grill, plus the hissing of freshly popped bottles of Mexican Coke

To make his cemita milanesa (\$6.50), he sprinkles the queso Oaxaca over breaded and butterflied pork chops smothered with the chipotle sauce used on the taco arabe. He layers in creamy avocado and a spicy, citrusy herb called papalo and places the whole thing in a sesame-crust bun baked daily by a local baker. This is the Muhammad Ali of Mexican sandwiches. The fresh, crispy cemita bun kicks the wimpy, airy torta bun's ass.

Though Anteliz is a cult icon of sorts among Chicago's top chefs and hosted Guy Fieri for a segment on "Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives," he's still as humble as he is dedicated to his business. With this success, he probably could raise prices, but as he said, "Few would complain, but there's still that fraction of my customers that would hurt. And I can't alienate them because they're the ones that kept me afloat for so many years before the foodies came. I can't line my pockets on their backs."

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