



Tacos de pescado with beer-battered mahi-mahi, chipotle slaw and pickled jalapeños.



Mac y queso with manchego cheese.



Tarta vainilla chocolate with dark chocolate, caramelized almonds and cookie crust.

# La Josie's deep roots to Mexico

**ADD THIS WEST LOOP SPOT TO THE  
RUNNING FOR CHICAGO'S BEST AL PASTOR**

By Michael Nigrant | FOR REDEYE

Pepe Barajas, chef/owner of La Josie, a new upscale Mexican restaurant in the West Loop, was practically born into the hospitality game.

As a little kid in the '80s, he was popping the tops off Jarritos and Coke for patrons at his grandfather's Mexico City taco stand. When he was 7, he immigrated to Chicago and watched his single mother waitress for her brother, founder of the local Los Comales chain of restaurants. Seeing her struggle financially, Barajas dropped out of high school and helped his mom open her own taqueria, Los Comales No. 8.

He completed his GED and committed to learning everything about operating a restaurant and read every Mexican cookbook he could get his hands on. In 2007, he opened up a spot near Midway called El Solazo. His Mexican heritage wasn't an issue, but location was a problem for his first restaurant—it was near a glut of pedestrian and mediocre spots.

"I remember going out and giving food to local businesses and as I was walking out of one place, I heard the guy say, 'Oh, great, another Mexican restaurant here on Pulaski,'" he said. "I didn't say it to him, but what I remember thinking was, 'We're not just another Mexican restaurant. We're not gonna stay where we start. We're always gonna drive to be better.'"

## The room

Barajas' success on the South Side allowed him to start searching for other opportunities. By luck, the Holiday Bar and Grill space in Chicago's West Loop was available, so he snatched it up.

"A lot of people have been saying, 'Oh you're riding a trend, going to hot Randolph Street.' I got this place a few years ago before City Winery and a lot of these places were here," said Barajas. "We had Holiday as a tenant, and that allowed me to really plan La Josie (named after his aunt)

for a couple years."

The attention to detail shows. Inside you'll find handsome wood floors, fulsome tufted banquettes and a robin's egg blue neon sign that says "Hoy por ti," the beginning of a Spanish idiom about paying things forward. Aesthetically, the restaurant skews more River North than Maxwell Street Market taco stand.

## The food

The kitchen is led by executive Saul Chavez, a Mercadito vet.

"Just like me, Saul didn't go to culinary school. Well, that's not true. He's amazing. He went to the 'love what you do' school," Barajas said.

Chavez and his crew dish up supple, house-made tortillas that waft splendid corn perfume. The fillings include a silky veal cheek barbacoa (\$14) and tender cochinita pibil (\$14), featuring a sinus-clearing habanero salsa that gives you a serious chile high. The carbon-flecked al pastor (\$14) is crispy, juicy and riddled with smoky pineapple. It has a serious case for best al pastor in Chicago.

I have only two quibbles with the tacos.

The pescado (\$16), which has a nice golden plank of fried mahi-mahi, could use a little more lime or pickled jalapeno to cut through the richness. Also, the tacos are only available in threes and you can't mix and match. Since most

of the trios cost \$14, if you have a small group, it will be an expensive proposition to try more than a couple of the 14 flavors on offer.

Guacamole (\$8), too, is inspired. There are three versions, and my favorite features flecks of strawberry and bracing bits of mint.

Ceviche (\$10) is made to order, which means the fish's flesh still has a nice bite. Mahi-mahi drips with floral notes of passion fruit with sweetness mitigated by a serrano chili bite.

Frijoles charros (\$5), often a gloppy unsalted mess at so many Mexican restaurants, feature distinct toothsome caoba beans, smoky chorizo and bacon bits, salty

## REVIEW

### La Josie

740 W. Randolph  
St. 312-929-2900  
★★ (out of four)



Interior of La Josie.

ham cubes and the spicy grassy essences of epazote and cilantro. It's eats like a legendary campfire chili.

While the mole tampiqueña plate (\$18) features a juicy cookbook-spread-worthy crosshatch-grill-marked chicken breast, the sauce on top just doesn't feature the deep cinnamon, chili and chocolate notes I expect from a stellar mole. Bajas tells me that they enhance a pre-made mole base for this dish.

On the other hand, head-on prawns (\$20) drip with a rusty-colored, fragrant garlic, butter and achiote paste-infused sazón sauce (brewed for six hours).

If I had a dollar for every terrible gourmet mac and cheese—or in this case, mac y queso—I've ever experienced, I might be on the Forbes richest people list. But, La Josie does not contribute to this fund. The mac and cheese here (\$8), featuring velvety manchego and fireworks of smoky grilled poblano pepper and roast sweet corn, is killer.

### The drinks

All that cheese and salt will make you thirsty. Stick to the margarita, a refreshing blend of fresh lime, Corazon blanco tequila and Mandarin Napoleon liqueur (\$12). This cocktail is smoky, orange-kissed nectar.

Some of the drinks were a little too liquor-heavy and unbalanced, including the Yo Soy Para Ti (\$12). Though it promised mezcal, I could not detect any of the charred agave essence I love in a great one. The bitter green tea in the drink also clashed with watermelon notes from a Ballast Point watermelon beer that was in the mix.



Margarita with Libelula tequila, organic agave nectar and lime.

### The dessert

At many Mexican restaurants, you're lucky to find a wobbly old flan as a sweet ending. Here, pastry chef Quetzal Alvarez serves some stellar goodies, including a treat called tarta vainilla chocolate, which tastes like a dark chocolate-covered creme brulee perched on a chocolate chip cookie (\$8). It's a pretty elegant sugar rush. There's also a ricotta cheesecake so moist it weeps rum and orange juice (\$9).

### The bottom line

Randolph Street in the West Loop has become a landing pad for Chicago's celebrity chefs. And while Pepe Barajas is not a big star just yet, his vision and execution of a gourmet Mexican experience on Randolph at La Josie means he's about to be a household name.

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

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