

## THE ESSENTIALS

UPPING YOUR CHICAGO RESTAURANT CRED ONE BITE AT A TIME



Tamales de elote  
KAITLYN MCQUAID FOR REDEYE

By Michael Nigrant | FOR REDEYE

What do you get when you combine a failing Belmont Cragin taqueria with the authentic Mexican recipes of a passionate family? Sol de Mexico.

Owner Carlos Tello was born in the Mexican state of Michoacan and came here as a young man. He worked as a server at a series of Italian restaurants, but dreamed of opening his own Mexican restaurant.

His brother-in-law, Mexican molé-making legend Geno Bahena, hired Tello to work the front of the house at the now-defunct Chilpancingo in River North. He came in on weekends to work in the kitchen and learn from Bahena. "That experience opened my soul. I didn't know who I was," he said. "But I got in touch with my ancestors."

Bahena left Chilpancingo and eventually decided to pursue an opportunity in Texas in 2006. Tello planned to follow him, but a man who owned a failing taqueria on the 3000 block of Cicero Avenue called Tello's mother-in-law, Clementina Flores (Bahena's mother), offering the space.

After some back and forth, he took over the space and recruited Flores to make her incredible molés, like the inky black molé negro she drizzled over juicy lamb chops (\$24), the ones she taught Geno to make. The joke became that Tello didn't just marry Bahena's sister, he stole Bahena's

### SOL DE MEXICO

3018 N. Cicero Ave. 773-282-4179

**Looks like:** A Mexican folk art market

**Sounds like:** Owner Carlos Tello's Spanish-inflected English as he greets tables

**Smells like:** Roasted chilis

mother, too.

Tello added the flavor of his native Michoacan in the form of tamales de elote, which are fluffy like corncakes and covered in green chili cream and a lacy crust of cheese. Tello said, "There's a saying in Mexico that if you're in a bad mood, the tamales will come [out] bad. Our happiness is reflected in that dish."

It's been seven years and Sol de Mexico is one of the best Mexican restaurants in Chicago. On most Sundays, Tello, Flores and other members of the Sol de Mexico staff sit down and discuss what's fresh at market. They invent new dishes such as enchiladas de langosta (\$27), tortillas stuffed with lobster, mushroom and creamy chipotle sauce. It's been a bit. "You'd never see lobster in an enchilada in Mexico," Tello said. "But people love them."

MICHAEL NAGRANT IS A REDEYE SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR.  
REDEYE@TRIDLINE.COM | @REDEYEATDRINK



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