



diningout

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“Corn masa boats” are filled with chicken in red mole, sweet plantains with sour cream, black beans with chorizo, and guacamole.



RAY OF LIGHT

Sol de Mexico burns brightly on dining scene

Restaurant critic Michael Nagrant continues his series of reviews on the “mom and pops” of Chicago’s vibrant dining scene.

The restaurant Sol de Mexico (“Sun of Mexico”) should really be renamed Sol de Chicago, for this Oaxacan-skewing Mexican joint in Chicago’s northwest Belmont Cragin neighborhood is truly a beacon of light brightening our fair city.

Its “foundation” — lead chef Clementina Flores — was once nanny to Chef Rick Bayless’ daughter, and mother to Chicago’s mole king Geno Bahena (of

the now defunct Chilpancingo, Ixcapuzalco, and Real Tenochtitlan). She is also mother-in-law to Sol de Mexico’s owner Carlos Tello. As Bahena likes to tell it, Tello not only won over his sister, but his mother, too.

Tello, himself, works the room on any given night, stalking the area boarded by pumpkin-colored walls, pacing underneath a Dia de los Muertos skeleton. On this Friday night he stopped at the foot of my rustic highback chair and stooped below a bug-eyed portrait of Diego Rivera and asks if I liked everything. Often, this is a moment where



Borrego en Mole Negro features rack of lamb in Oaxacan black mole and is served with mashed potatoes at Sol de Mexico in Belmont-Cragin. | RICHARD A. CHAPMAN-SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

I’m compelled to lie, to discourage conversation and protect my identity as critic, but also because rarely do I like everything. Still, I’m usually complimentary no matter the verdict, as it feels ungrateful to be otherwise, but if there is a pause before my answer, it is a telling one.

But tonight, there is no space between his query and my

breathless affirmation. Though it’s been open almost seven years, Sol de Mexico, which began very well, is better than it has ever been. Taking over the neighboring storefront in the last few years, it’s almost doubled in size. It’s no longer BYOB, but a repository of one of the finer tequila lists in town. The margaritas, especially the

\$7 house “del Sol,” a quenching sweet/sour blend of fresh lime, triple sec and earthy tequila, is as balanced as the old Topolo margarita at the more popular Frontera Grill. Riffs on that classic, including one dashed with fresh pomegranate juice are just as refreshing. It’s the cilantro julep whose spicy herbaceous quality tempered by a drizzle of

pineapple juice whose inventiveness earns the most clamor at my table.

There are few better spots for traditional Mexican mole sauce — that brew of toasted blended chilis, chocolate and nuts. There are probably as many moles as Mexican grandmothers, but the mother moles are grouped by their color: negro, verde, and my

favorite, *mancha manteles* (which translates as tablecloth stainer) among others.

It is indeed a tablecloth or a white oxford shirt’s greatest nightmare. But at Sol de Mexico, stains are a given, for it is impossible not to rip voraciously at the juicy crosshatched, bone-in pork chop and the braised accompanying pineapple splashed with



Uchepos grantinados, fresh corn tamales drizzled with roasted chilaca cream served under a crust of two cheeses and a garden chilaca cream sauce, earn raves as “the very best” tamale.



The charcoal-grilled French cut pork chop with classic mole mancha manteles is in a cinnamon and fruity tomato-infused sauce.

like a fine cup of black coffee.

The polar opposite to the negro is Sol de Mexico’s green pumpkin seed or pipian mole. Its hue comes from Serrano chilis and a healthy bit of coriander. It swaddles plump circles of charred, delicate, briny scallops, left just slightly rare at the center.

There is more than mole at Sol de Mexico. The wood-fired *nopales*, or plank of cactus, is smoky — a nice compliment for flaky tilapia swimming in a lake

of creamy chipotle sauce. *Uchepos Grantinados* is the very best tamale I have ever had. It is cloud-light, fluffy, punctuated with bits of farm fresh corn and smothered in green chilaca (the fresh version of a dried pasilla chili) cream. It makes me realize the sins I’ve committed indulging in those hefty lard-stuffed, gut-bomb tamales sold out of red coolers late night at Wicker Park bars. Never again!

Tortillas — colored red, green



Pay de coco is a pliant macaroon pie held together with sugar and egg whites with a roasted cherry and a scent of almond.

SOL DE MEXICO

★★★

3018 N. Cicero (773) 282-4119; soldemexicochicago.com

Hours: Wed.-Mon. 11 a.m. - 10 p.m.; Fri.-Sat. 11 a.m. - 10:30 p.m.

Prices: Appetizers \$7-\$11, Entrees \$17-\$25, Dessert \$4-\$6.50

Try: Uchepos Grantinados, Puerco in Manchamanteles, Pay de Coco

In a bite: One of the best Mexican restaurants serving some of the greatest traditional Oaxacan mole sauces in Chicago.

KEY: ★★★★★ Extraordinary; ★★★★★ Excellent; ★★ Very Good; ★ Good; Zero stars: Poor

and white (to commemorate Mexican Independence I am told) — are piping-hot, fresh from the flat-top, and come with almost every entree. Still my favorite use of masa is when it’s deep fried into sturdy round “boats” for sopes and piled high with roasted sweet plantains drizzled with tangy crema and a crumble of queso fresco.

Even desserts — caramel-glistening upside-down pineapple pie of sorts with a serrated edge of roasted pecan, and *pay de coco*, a giant pliant macaroon pie held together with sugar and egg whites and the roasted cherry scent of almond — are magical.

A meal at Sol de Mexico, or maybe it’s the coma after eating so much, channels the kind of sensual dream state you only read about in a Gabriel Garcia Marquez novel. And yet, on a recent Friday night, though Sol de Mexico has earned numerous accolades — a Bib Gourmand from the vaunted Michelin guide among others — there are only a few patrons. I can’t fathom why, for this restaurant could burn no brighter.

Michael Nagrant is a local freelance writer. E-mail the Sun-Times Dining section at diningout@suntimes.com with questions and comments.