

Title:

Taléo restaurant is something special

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Summary:

Its classic Mexican recipes blend with contemporary California cuisine at the Irvine eatery.

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Article Body:

I could barely get any work done the hour after I returned from lunch at Taléo Mexican Grill in Irvine (in the heart of California's Orange County) -- and that tells all you need to know.

People kept interrupting me, seeking wisdom about this good food they were hearing about.

In that hour, my lunch companion Brenda couldn't stop telling folks about the fresh ingredients, the beautiful room, the smart service -- and our simple, sumptuous dessert.

She just couldn't remember the restaurant name.

Thus the traffic to my desk.

``What's the name of that place you went for lunch?'' Rebecca asked. ``Can you give me the address?''

``Hey, Andrew, where did you take our boss for lunch?'' Neil said. ``I'm heading out for a drink after work and it sounds perfect.''

Perfect is a hard label to live up to, but our lunch was certainly grand, and the best of three good meals I've shared at Taléo since October.

In the course of two dinners and that lunch, friends and I tasted our way

through entrees and appetizers that regularly snapped with flavor. They came on plates presented with care and beauty.

A ceviché appetizer (\$10) was peppery, but not overpowering. The chicken in my wife's molé poblano (\$14) was moist, and the molé was a rich, aromatic pleasure. The tacos al carbon (\$16) were built with filet mignon. The camarones al mojo (\$18) lolled in a buttery, roasted garlic sauce that complemented the fresh shrimp's natural flavor.

The best entree was my chile relleno (\$12). Wrapped in a light, tempura-like batter, the Anaheim chile was like none other I've had in a relleno: It was firm and crisp, not limp or overcooked. The pork-and-mushroom stuffing was earthy and perfectly complemented the pepper's soft sharpness. Best of all, no gooey cheese filling, just a small sprinkling atop.

Oh, and the margaritas (\$7) were pretty good. (Though my personal favorite, for a variety of reasons, gets mixed at a competitor's beach-front bar. That's another story.)

These meals weren't all perfect, mind you. The filet meat in the tacos was generally buttery, but my wife bit into a gristle roadblock. The dinner ribs (\$22) we tried were tasty, but not all that differentiated to my taste from other ribs.

Still, you can see and taste that something special is happening at Taléo.

“This is the way we eat in Mexico,” founder Nic Villarreal said. He wanted a place that was upscale, with a well-appointed dining room, the best ingredients, meals that fused heritage recipes with California cuisine, and service that never stopped.

Villarreal opened Taléo in July after renovating an abandoned Left at Albuquerque location in the Park Place center, in the shadows of two new 18-story condo towers now taking shape.

He brought along a decade of experience working at Houston's, including its Gulfstream in Newport Center (where he met his financial backers for Taléo). That background shows in the dining room and bar. The high ceiling is decorated with wooden beams that summon rancho-style vigas. The leather chairs and banquettes are stitched with hacienda-style embroidery. Contemporary Mexican art -- paintings, sculptures, photography -- feed your eyes.

It's very clubby, yet open and airy in a very accessible, Houston's sort of way.

Villarreal built a management team with similar experience, and a chef, Jose Acevedo, with whom he shared a trove of family recipes.

They all gathered in Villarreal's Hermosa Beach kitchen to test the recipes. He kept hearing a certain refrain:

`` `If you do a little more of this, it'll be better,' Jose kept saying. And God almighty, there was a huge difference,' ' Villarreal recalled.

Those touches were on display at lunch. Take the seabass (\$15), cooked with a yellow molé -- roasted yellow pepper, yellow squash, yellow tomato, with a dash of vanilla. The fish was fine, but the sauce was outstanding.

We kept asking our server about it, and he told us about the ingredients, the six hours it takes to prepare.

Then he surprised us with a smart touch.

``You should taste this,' ' he said, materializing after our meal with a ramekin full of red molé, roasted deep, with a flavor that started light at the front of my tongue and rolled back, warming and glowing all the way down.

Then we ordered dessert, tres leches (\$7). It's Acevedo's take on the traditional pan de leche, or sweet-milk cake.

Wow.

White cake infused with condensed milk, cream and topped with hand-whipped cream. Moist, rich, just a hint of sweet riding onto your palate and whisking away the aftertaste of chiles.

I asked Neil if he made it out to Taléo for drinks that night.

``We did, and we had food, too,' ' he said. ``It was good. Very good.' '