

DAILY NEWS

\$1.00

NEW YORK'S HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER

3: FOOD

SUI DAY NOW

MEXICAN LIGHT

THE REAL THING IS HEART HEALTHY & LOW-FAT

BY ISABEL FORGANG

You're trying to get rid of the extra pounds that piled up over the holidays, so perhaps you're staying away from Mexican food to avoid fat.

Not necessary:

All the heaviness that comes from loading food down with thick, gooey cheese—that's the American interpretation," says Patricia Sandoval, chef/owner of Mercadito, which opened last fall in the East Village. "That's not what Mexican food is all about."

To Sandoval and the new breed of modern Mexican chefs, the food should be about clean, fresh flavors.

"It's one of the most beautiful cuisines for good flavor and dietary values. It's one of easiest cuisines

to work with and it's heart healthy," says Roberto Santibanez, Rosa Mexicano's culinary director.

Unlike French sauces, which are based on reductions of beef and chicken stock, our salsas and sauces are based on vegetables. [For most sauces we] sauté onions and garlic and roast tomatoes, then blend them with chiles and herbs. Salsas are made with tomatoes, tomatillos, onions, garlic jalapeños and cilantro, all blended fresh with a squeeze of lime. It's delicious and it's healthy."

Also, corn tortillas have no fat and are made from a whole grain (corn) that has added calcium thanks to an overnight soaking in hot water with limestone (the limestone changes the chemical structure of corn somewhat, making it a healthier grain, says Santibanez). It's enough to make you realize that Mexican food has a lot going for it.

Suenos' chef-owner Sue Torres opened the Chelsea-based eatery a year and a half ago to do her

interpretation of Mexican food based on a foundation of authentic ingredients and technique. "But I wanted [the food] to be more health conscious," she says. Her tortillas, for example, are made with vegetable shortening, not lard, and the seafood in her tacos is poached in coconut milk and chiles.

If the high-carb content still has you hesitating, Julian Medina, executive chef at the upper East Side's Zocalo, has some reassuring words.

"I try to do dishes with a lot of flavor and [not as] many carbs," he says. He serves his seafood soup, for instance, with rice on the side. "It's very traditional to have rice in the soup but I put it on the side so if [you] don't want it, [you] don't have to have it."

In similar fashion, rice and beans go on the side, as well "so if people don't want extra carbs they don't have to have them."

So even Atkins fanatics can indulge in a guilt-free Mexican fiesta. ♦



MOJO WORKING: Soho Cantina executive chef Ricardo Hernandez's Camarones Mojo de Ajo (Shrimp in Garlic Sauce).

CAMARONES MOJO DE AJO (SHRIMP IN GARLIC SAUCE)

Serves 2

From Ricardo Hernandez, executive chef of Soho Cantina

For the shrimp:

- 1½ pounds large shrimp, cleaned and deveined
- 4 cloves garlic
- ¼ cup fresh squeezed orange juice
- 4 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil, divided
- 2 tablespoons chopped cilantro, plus additional for garnish
- Salt and pepper, to taste

For the rice:

- 1 small plum tomato, rough chopped
- 2 cloves garlic
- 2 tablespoons white onion, chopped
- 1 teaspoon olive oil
- ½ cup uncooked long grain rice
- 1¼ cup chicken stock

Make the garlic sauce: Put the garlic, orange juice, 2 tablespoons of the oil, cilantro and salt and pepper to taste in a blender and process until smooth. Set aside.

Make the rice: In a blender put the tomato, garlic and onion and puree. Set aside.

In a small pot on medium high flame, heat the oil and add the rice. Stir frequently for 1 minute. Add the chicken stock and pureed tomato sauce and let boil for 1 minute. Lower the flame, cover and simmer for 18 minutes.

When the rice is cooked, heat a sauté pan and add the remaining oil. When hot, add the shrimp and cook for 30 seconds. Add garlic sauce and cook, stirring frequently, until shrimp are just cooked through, about 3-5 minutes. Add salt and pepper to taste.

Serve shrimp over rice; pour garlic sauce over shrimp; sprinkle with chopped cilantro.



CAESAR SALAD

Serves 2

Caesar salad originated in Mexico, says Ricardo Hernandez of Soho Cantina. Here is his Mexican version. If you can't find queso fresco, a crumbly Mexican cheese, substitute ricotta.

- 1 lime, juiced
- 2 tablespoons red wine vinegar
- 2 teaspoons capers, drained
- 4 tablespoons queso fresco, divided
- 1 egg yolk
- 4 tablespoons canola oil
- 4 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 2 hearts of romaine, cleaned
- 1 corn tortilla, sliced into thin strips and deep fried

Put lime juice, red wine vinegar, capers, half the cheese and egg yolk in a food processor and blend. Pour both oils slowly into mixture and blend to incorporate. Set aside.

Cut the romaine hearts in half lengthwise and place on plates. Pour dressing over the lettuce, garnish with remaining cheese and tortilla chips.



TANYA BRAGANZI

SAVORING WHAT'S AT STEAK: Mercadito chef Patricio Sandoval's Steak Tacos with Roasted Poblano-Tomatillo Salsa



COURTESY: SHANE GIBBS/ALAMY
APPLE OF HIS EYE: Roberto Santibanez with his *Sopa de Chayote*.

SOPA DE CHAYOTE (CHAYOTE SOUP)

Serves 4-6

Roast Poblano, Serrano, Cilantro, 1/2 bunch of Roma Tomatoes

- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 large leek, white part only, washed and finely sliced
- 2 garlic cloves, finely chopped
- 1/2 cup white onion, chopped

- 1 serrano chile, or to taste, finely chopped
- 2 1/2 pounds chayotes, peeled, cored and diced in 1/2-inch pieces
- 6 cups chicken stock, or as much as needed
- Salt, to taste
- 1/4 small bunch of cilantro, washed and tied like a bouquet (10-12 complete rooted stems)
- 2 sweet apples such as Golden Delicious

In a heavy bottom saucpan, heat the oil. Add the leek, garlic, onion and chile, and cook on medium heat until translucent, about 5 minutes. Add chayotes and cook for 5 minutes. Add enough stock to just cover; add salt to taste, and bring to a boil. Cut the bottom root from the tied bunch of cilantro, and add the cilantro to the pot; simmer soup gently until chayotes are cooked, about 20 minutes.

Discard the cilantro and corn just enough to put into a blender. Blend soup to a smooth puree, adding additional stock if needed to give it the consistency of velouté sauce. Return soup to pot and bring to a gentle boil; check seasoning.

While soup is heating, peel and dice apples; add to soup bowls. (Do not cut apples with lime or lemon juice and cut them ahead of time; it will change the flavor of the apple.) Ladle soup into bowls and serve.

STEAK TACOS WITH ROASTED POBLANO- TOMATILLO SALSA

Serves 4

Puree: Patricio Sandoval, chef-owner of Mercadito

For the marinade:

- 6 sprigs of rosemary
- 4 garlic cloves

- 1 cup olive oil
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 3 pounds skirt steak

For the salsa:

- 1 poblano chili
- 3 tomatillos (substitute small tomatoes if necessary), cut into small dice
- 1 red onion, cut into small dice
- 1 ripe avocado, peeled, cut into small dice
- 1 lemon, juiced
- Salt and fresh pepper, to taste
- 12 corn tortillas

Make the marinade: Place rosemary, garlic and onion in food processor and chop very fine. Add olive oil, salt and pepper and pulse to combine. Marinate steak two hours.

Make salsa: If you have a gas burner, roast the chili over a flame until the skin is charred. In an electric stove, blanch the chili in an oven set at 350 for an hour. Cover charred chili with a damp cloth for 10 minutes. As soon as the chili is cool enough to handle, peel off the skin and cut the flesh into small dice.

Combine the chili, tomatillos, onion and avocado in a bowl. Add lemon juice, season with salt and pepper. Set aside.

To finish dish, remove steak from marinade and pat dry. Grill or sauté to desired doneness. While steak is cooking, heat tortillas. Cut cooked steak into cubes and place on top of tortillas. Top with salsa and serve.

COCONUT-SERRANO POACHED SEAFOOD CHALUPA WITH CUCUMBER SALSA

Makes 6 chalupas

Sue Torres, chef-owner of Suanito, serves this as an appetizer. Mascote, the corn flour used at many restaurants in Mexico, is sold by many supermarkets. At Mercadito, contact with a phone number: 312-614-1114. If it's not there, call 312-614-1114.



REBECCA MCALPIN

SEA-ING IS BELIEVING: Sue Torres' Coconut-Serrano Poached Seafood Chalupa.

serve on corn tortillas. As for the seafood, "choose whatever you like," Torres says. "Mix it up or stick to one kind. At the restaurant, we use salmon, tuna, grouper and bass."

For the cucumber salsa:

- 1 cucumber, peeled, seeded and cut in small dice
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 lime, juiced
- 1 tablespoon cilantro, cut in chiffonade ribbons
- Salt and fresh pepper, to taste

For the fish:

- 14-ounce can coconut milk
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 1 lemon, zest and juice
- 1/4 serrano chile, rough chopped with seeds
- 1/2 cup orange juice
- Salt, to taste

- 1 1/4 pounds seafood like salmon, tuna, grouper and/or bass, rinsed in cold water and cut into bite-size pieces
- 1 avocado, sliced, for garnish

For the chalupas:

- 1 1/2 cups Mascote corn flour
- 1 teaspoon salt, preferably kosher or sea

Make the cucumber salsa, in a bowl, combine the cucumber, oil, lime juice, cilantro, salt and pepper. Set aside for about an hour for the flavors to meld.

Make the fish: Place coconut milk, sugar, lemon zest and juice and chopped chile in a pot with 2 cups of water. Add salt to taste and bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer 30 minutes to reduce somewhat. Add the seafood and poach at a gentle boil for 4-5 minutes.

While the coconut milk is simmering, make the chalupas. Heat a griddle on high heat with a chop of water droplets.

Place the corn flour in a bowl. Add the salt and 1 cup of hot water and let dissolve. Pour the hot salted water over the flour mix with your hands to form a dough.

Place a sturdy plastic bag on the counter to keep the dough from sticking. Use heavier plastic, such as a Ziploc bag, rather than the thinner type used for fresh produce in the market. Roll dough into 2-inch diameter balls; you will get about six balls. Form each into a shallow oval "boat." Six inches long x 2 1/2 inches wide, with fairly round sides.

Cook the sides of the hot griddle for 2 minutes on the flat side, turn them over and cook on the egg-side trenches. The chalupas can be made earlier in the day and briefly reheated before being served.

Fill chalupas with the poached seafood; top the seafood poaching liquid to the griddle in a shallow layer; add the cucumber salsa and serve with fresh lime juice.