



Home > Chicago Restaurants > Editorial Review > First look: Mercadito

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New York import Mercadito talks a big game, but does it have the tacos to back it up?

By M. Kathleen Pratt
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Mercadito
 Address: 108 W. Kinzie St., Chicago, IL, 60610
 Phone: 312-329-9555
 Overall User Rating: ★★★★★ (5 ratings)
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 Hours: 5 p.m.-midnight Sunday-Monday, 5 p.m.-1 a.m. Wednesday-Thursday, 5 p.m.-2 a.m. Friday, 5 p.m.-3 a.m. Saturday
 Official Web Site: <http://www.mercaditochicago.com>
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Any out-of-town Mexican restaurant that dares come to Chicago had best be prepared to make a stand. The competition, from neighborhood taquerias to Rick Bayless' mighty Clark Street triumvirate, covers a lot of ground and sets the bar high. Luckily, River North newcomer **Mercadito** ("little market" in Spanish) isn't short on swagger.

Armed with Mexican market-inspired flavors and lots of tequila, the lively concept from chef Patricio Sandoval and his brothers/partners Alfredo and Felipe arrived from New York last week ready to play. Clearly, the success of Mercadito's three N.Y. outposts has bestowed confidence: The servers wear shirts bearing bold proclamations such as "The shrimp taco made me weak" and "The taco that changed my life," phrases culled from overheard customer comments in New York.

Tacos, as you might surmise, are the house specialty. Judging from the tables of the mostly twenty- and thirty-something crowd on opening weekend, they're also a top seller, right up there with handcrafted tequila-based cocktails from the bar (see sidebar). There are a dozen taco options in all, including a fancy version of pork carnitas topped with pickled onion, spicy slaw and toasted peanuts, and those T-shirt-worthy shrimp tacos, which get a solid hit of flavor from roasted garlic and chipotle mojo. The tacos we tried--particularly the tacos estilo Baja, crunchy beer-battered mahi mahi topped with a spoonful of spicy slaw and chipotle aioli--were all quite good, if a bit pricey.

Though tacos come four to a plate (\$12.50), be prepared to place more than one order. These are not taco-stand tacos, but rather cocktail-party tacos, easily gone in three bites. The size is great if you're seeking variety. You can't mix and match within an order, so if you want to try more than one kind, you'll be facing 8, 12 or even two dozen tacos. Alternately, you can nibble a single order and save room to explore the rest of the menu, which is rounded out by salsas (\$2.50 each, two for \$4, three for \$6), guacamoles (\$8 each, two for \$10, three for \$12), ceviches (\$11.50 each, three for \$20.50), *botanas* (\$9.50), sides (\$4.50 each) and a brief selection of larger plates such as shrimp enchiladas verdes (\$18.50) and grilled adobo-marinated whole chicken (\$23).

Though the duo of corn masa quesadillas (\$9.50) we sampled from the *botanas* (a.k.a. snacks) portion of the menu lacked pizzazz, we had no trouble finding noteworthy additions among the salsas, guacamoles and sides. Surprises included the sweet, crisp corn bites (\$2.50) that accompanied a tiny dish of tart, smoky chipotle salsa (each of the six salsas offered comes with tortilla chips, but it's worth a few extra bucks to get a basket of these die-sized cubes) and a side of arroz verde, a rice-and-cheese casserole seasoned with tomatillos and roasted poblanos, oven-baked to form a bubbling brown layer of melted Oaxaca and manchego cheeses on top.

For all the talk about tacos, they aren't the best thing on the menu. That distinction goes to the ceviches--frankly, it's an injustice that they don't get their own T-shirt. There are four from which to choose, including a slightly sweet shrimp and pineapple version and a tangy mahi mahi with avocado and tomato in orange-chile de arbol broth. The standout is the ceviche de callo, bay scallops and sliced red grapes marinated in a key lime-morita chile broth brightened with a dab of mint.



tequila's shot



With a tequila list more than 70 strong, a cocktail program designed by fancy-pants cocktails consultants the Tippling Bros. and local star bartenders such as Jennifer Contraveso behind the bar, it's no wonder Mercadito's beverage menu is just as lengthy as the food lineup. Handcrafted cocktails (\$9-\$13) are exclusively tequila-based and incorporate ingredients both trendy (St. Germain elderflower liqueur, hibiscus) and innovative (cilantro oil, epazote), plus plenty of chiles. Try the signature Little Market (tequila reposado, pineapple, guajillo syrup and cilantro oil rimmed with pico piquin seasoning) or venture into the *chela con piquete* ("spiked beer") menu for El Pirata (tequila blanco, Mexican lager, pineapple juice, stick cinnamon, chile morita, guajillo pepper and other seasonings, \$8).

--MKP

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Life-changing? Not quite. But we'd definitely buy the T-shirt.

M. Kathleen Pratt is the Metromix dining producer. kpratt@tribune.com



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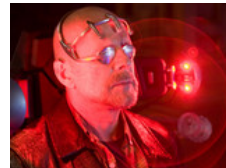
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