


This Cinco de Mayo, celebrate simple, authentic truths

By Father Leo Patalinghug

Since 1862's Battle of Puebla, Mexicans have celebrated their victory every Cinco de Mayo with simply delicious tacos, tortillas and tequilas.

Finding good Mexican cuisine requires avoiding fast food and seeking out roaming taco trucks. Misnamed "Little Mexico," the area near Fells Point has authentic flavors, but some of Broadway's grungy and seedy establishments can destroy your appetite.

Internet foodie sites encouraged me to try Federal Hill's Blue Agave Restaurante and Tequileria, around the corner from the churches of the Catholic Community of South Baltimore. 

Agave caters to yuppie, food-centric crowds seeking more than Tex-Mex. They want ambiance, cleanliness and a modern vibe celebrated with traditional plates. Chic background music, a full bar, attractive exposed brick walls, well-appointed colorful artwork, sturdy tile-covered tables and attractive appointments offer a relaxing space. A few steps into sectional dining - seemingly without handicap access - plus the limited street parking create limitations and possible frustrations.

While it was hardly a full restaurant (5:30 p.m. on a weeknight), a multicultural service staff seemed eager to provide attention, helpful food knowledge and seemingly endless supplies of warm tortillas - deliciously salted, crispy and served with chipotle, tomatillo and tomato salsas.

Tequila and margarita aficionados would be pleased with the high grade and libation varieties - in moderation, of course! Happily, the "Happy Hour" was not rowdy enough to disturb dining conversations.

The menu satisfies Mexican foodie know-it-alls with authentically flavorful, attractively presented, but slightly higher priced platos tipicos, such as \$7 mushroom empenadas - simple, flaky and delicious; and a \$15 large appetizer of mole-drenched, grilled skirt steak, quail and longaniza (which fell apart and tasted like chile con carne). Market priced (expensive) fresh ceviche of shrimp lacked the lip-smacking pop of lime, salt and cilantro. Supersized salads for \$15-\$18 could hardly be considered diet food, especially topped with grilled chicken or shrimp. Fifteen-dollar burritos looked more like a chimichanga while the \$16 pork carnitas had the boldest and best flavor.

Up-scaled plates were disappointing. I appreciate fusion and “fancified” food efforts, but the highest-priced menu item, \$27, felt like a rip-off. The lamb lacked flavor, the goat cheese potato gratin was flat and mushy; and the white chocolate mole had a poorly tempered chocolate consistency.

Thankfully, the least expensive/ most traditional dessert choices - churros and the humongous serving of tres leches cake (\$7 each), give budgeted diners opportunities to share a delicious sweet finish.

I would return to Blue Agave, especially after a Saturday vigil Mass with friends, a baseball game or after a downtown stroll. I won't order higher priced items, but stick with traditional (less expensive) ones. In Blue Agave's case, less is more!

Cinco de Mayo teaches us that winning the battle over hearts and minds is not done with super fancy or expensive - such as the modern French forces of 1862, but with a firm commitment to what is authentically good and true. Celebrate that this May 5!

Father Patalinghug is founder of Grace Before Meals. (address for link is www.gracebeforemeals.com)

In reviewing restaurants and dining venues, Father Patalinghug gives up to 10 Hail Marys as penance for any “sins” he discovers during his visit. If everything was great, he'll give a Glory Be in thanksgiving. Categories rated are: food, menu satisfaction, meal presentation, pricing, beverage selection, ambiance, décor,

service, accessibility and family friendliness.

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