

Mole stars in signature dishes at Oaxacan Kitchen in Palo Alto

Melinda Sacks

Posted: 10/22/2008 11:44:57 AM PDT

We knew something special awaited us when we saw the line out the door of the Oaxacan Kitchen, a newly opened Palo Alto restaurant hidden away on a side street off California Avenue. The buzz about the "Auténtica Comida Mexicana" preceded us. A long, narrow space, but colorful and inviting, the Oaxacan Kitchen offers authentic cuisine that is a welcome respite from the heavy, mostly monotone Americanized food that passes as Mexican in Palo Alto. From the moment you walk in the door to be welcomed by Zaida Kent — co-owner with her husband, chef Ron Kent — you'll feel the homey vibe that is making this place a neighborhood favorite. The walls of terra cotta and deep forest green, photos of Oaxaca and lively open kitchen give a sense of excitement before any food arrives. In addition to the restaurant, the Kents own Oaxacan Foods, manufacturers of moles (sauces), chocolates, antojitos (little appetizers) and tamales.

Be prepared to order a bit out of your comfort zone if you want to try some of the best dishes here. My son, who was initially disappointed not to find burritos on the menu, couldn't have been happier with his camarones con chipotle (\$17), plump seared Gulf shrimp served with rice, black beans and fresh vegetables, mostly yellow squash and zucchini. Choices that may be more kid-friendly are tamales (\$6 each), homemade and a must-order, and soft tacos (\$8) served with rice and beans.

We started dinner with guacamole with tortilla chips (\$7), a chunky, fresh version that highlights pure, rich avocado with a lemon kick. Other appetizers include ceviche (\$9) — a sprightly mixture of marinated white fish brought to life with cilantro, lime and jalapeño — and tacos fritos (\$7), tortillas rolled around chicken, then fried and topped with salsa, queso fresco (a mild white Mexican cheese) and a dollop of guacamole.

Tortillas and other corn-based dishes are made on a comal (hot griddle) near the front door, where their fragrance can make waiting for a table almost torture. Once you get to order, you can ask for extra tortillas and they'll arrive in a covered warmer, providing the perfect platform for mole, the thick dark chile sauce.

Moles highlight the Oaxacan Kitchen's signature dishes (ranging from \$15 to \$17). Mole negro is a deeply rich sauce of chiles, seeds, spices, nuts, and, yes, chocolate, that drapes rice, tortillas, beans and a poached chicken breast. Mole verde con pechuga de pollo features a sauce of green herbs — chiles, parsley, yerba santa and epazote. Or if you want a sampler, order Fiesta de Moles, which will give you a chance to taste four of the sauces, smoky with an undercurrent of sweetness.

When I said I wanted her favorite vegetarian dish, our waitress suggested tlayuda (\$8.50), a large house-made corn tortilla piled with black bean puree, avocado, queso fresco, salsa and tomato. The crisp tortilla "crust" creates a dish reminiscent of a tostada, but with richer, more diverse flavors. Add chicken or grilled steak for \$2.

Although you'll find them on Mexican restaurant menus everywhere, the Oaxacan Kitchen's versions of tamales (\$4) and chiles rellenos (\$13) are a cut above. Freshly made daily without lard, both are brightly flavored and plain scrumptious. A vegan tamale with butternut squash has to be one of the more unusual local offerings.

We were certainly full enough to forgo dessert, but upon hearing that Ron Kent had once worked at Cocolat, I couldn't help myself.

The table next to us was oohing and ahing over Churros and Chocolate (\$7), freshly baked pastry with a bowl of cinnamon-tinged hot chocolate. But the Oaxacan Chocolate Experience (\$8) was the right choice: a tiny cup of the Oaxacan hot chocolate, a dark chocolate cake that is more like a soufflé, and a scoop of rich chocolate and cinnamon ice cream. Ah, perfection.

Types of food: Oaxacan-inspired moles, house-made tortillas, seafood, tamales, "the best of Oaxacan street food"

Average meal price: Under \$20

Good choices: Chiles rellenos, tamales, molotes (fried corn masa rolls filled with chorizo and potato)

Not recommended: If you don't like your food spicy, ask for guidance from your server.

Attitude: Warm, family feel. You're likely to meet one or both owners as they check on you during your meal.

Amenities: A bar at the window offers easy seating for single diners.

Vegetarian options: Almost all dishes can be prepared vegetarian. Great choices are guacamole, tlayuda, quesadillas and tamale verde. Much of the produce is organic, and the restaurant tries to buy from farms using sustainable methods.

Drinks: Beer, including Sierra Nevada on tap (\$4); small list of wines, most from California, with some nice bottles around \$30

Eat in car: Could be a mess

Next-day edibility: Most dishes would hold up well to rewarming.

Who goes there: Families and couples from the neighborhood

Credit cards: Yes

Parking: Free street parking; large, free public lot just around the corner.

Restaurant reviews are conducted anonymously. The Mercury News pays for all meals.