

SOUTH OF THE BORDER IN DOBBS FERRY

This “healthy” Mexican newcomer is simple, cheap, and good

BY JOHN BRUNO TURIANO

Mexican fare has a lot going for it. It's cheap, filling, perfect for groups, and no Main Street is quite complete without a restaurant serving beef tacos, cheese enchiladas, and chicken mole. But, por favor, all those calories, all those artery-clogging ingredients!

Enter year-old Tomatillo, an informal Dobbs Ferry restaurant that serves what it maintains is a healthier, fresher spin on traditional Mexican dishes. Owner David Starkey buys much of his produce from Stone Barns Center in Pocantico Hills, the county's latest shrine to fresh, in-season, from-the-farm ingredients.

The dining room was packed on a Friday night when my foursome arrived, so we waited for a table with a round (okay, perhaps two) at the bar, and eventually were seated at a table by a wall of exposed brick.

There's not much depth to the menu, but a simple menu is a good thing here, because a protracted period of deciding what to eat would have meant overindulging on the delicious, chunky red salsa that accompanied the teeming basket of rainbow chips on the table. The standout starter was chili, a medium-hot, thick concoction with turkey cooled by creamy swirls of sour cream.

Skirt steak, a cheap but surprisingly flavorful and tender cut, was the central player in the “Iron Man” burrito (filled with ripe-sweet red peppers and topped with a smoky-sweet chipolte sauce) and the best of the main courses we tried.

The “Picadillo Street” burrito, filled with shredded pork, was not as good. The thin shreds of meat were lost among the pinto beans and rice filling. Other burritos include the “Berkeley” (a whole wheat tortilla with roasted chicken) and the “Green Machine” (a spinach tortilla with baby spinach and guacamole). Warning: The burritos are massive; I had to make room in my refrigerator for the doggie bags. A main course runner-up was the Latin-spiced rotisserie chicken, complete with an exquisite golden-brown skin.

In many dishes at Tomatillo, there's more lettuce and tomato than cheese (with the exception of a respectable cheese enchilada). Good for the health-conscious but, come on, a Mexican eatery without gobs of cheese on everything? But after tasting the five house-made sauces (the chipolte, plus roasted pepper barbecue, cilantro pesto, tomatillo, and classic mole), the Stone Barns legacy is certain with these fresh-tasting condiments (the smooth spicy-rich mole would be my first pick). As tasty as the mole was, it couldn't rescue the flimsy, waxy stack of soft corn tortillas served as part of a shrimp-fajita dish.

To end the meal, there were but two choices, an acceptable flan, and a double-fudge cookie topped with cilantro ice cream. Don't wince. It's terrific.

Cozy, simple, and affordable, Tomatillo, while far from perfect, has enough originality to make its doorway a worthy border to cross.

TOMATILLO

13 Cedar St., Dobbs Ferry
(914) 478-2300

Hours: Tues. to Sun. 11:30 am-9:30 pm. Appetizers: \$3.95-\$7.95; burritos: \$7.95-\$10.95; other entrées: \$5.95-\$15.95 (for a whole chicken); desserts: \$4.