Masa

Better than butter: a Southwestern eatery with an edge

Above: The glowing atmosphere of Masa welcomes bar-goers and diners alike.

Chef Philip Aviles uses the same basic ingredients found in most other Boston kitchens. He just tweaks them—adding a squeeze of "jalapeño lime emulsion," a drizzle of mild ancho-chile sauce, or a spoonful of cilantro relish—in such a way that an item as ubiquitous as a Maine lobster-tail appetizer ($9) is paired with creamy corn-and-goat-cheese tamales and a roasted tomato-and-chipotle salsa instead of with boring old melted butter. Bravo, we say. A Boston eatery with an edge.

Aviles recently bought Masa ("dough" in Spanish) from its original owners, who opened it three years ago. The large space at the corner of Tremont and Appleton Streets nevertheless feels intimate with its "Southwestern abstract" tones of smooth pale browns and thick yellows. The lighting is superbly subtle: a dainty beaded sconce shone at our booth, and the whole restaurant glows invitingly like a firefly in the night. The bar, separated from the dining room by a half-wall, is beautiful and relaxed: huge windows open onto the street (allowing fresh air and urban bustle to swirl indoors in season) and comfortable seats face a wall of uplit, glistening bottles. It is a nice neighborhood spot to meet friends or colleagues for drinks.

For starters, in addition to the lobster tail, we had a pile of tequila-roasted mussels ($9)—fleshy treats dripping with ancho butter and a Margarita-style kick. The broth we soaked up with chunks of corn bread laced with chiles that tasted like carrots. The gazpacho appeared a bit strange the night we were there—pureed to a tomato cream, with bits of vegetables, it was more like barbecue sauce than soup. (Friends who eat it at Masa regularly say this is *not* typical.) That was our only complaint.

The specialty of the house is a satisfying, 16-ounce, chile-rubbed center-cut "cowboy steak" ($34) served with mashed potatoes, fresh baby corn, huge crunchy onion rings, and the "Masa salsa" (composed of about 20 different ingredients). The tequila-marinated grilled shrimp entrée ($21) arrived nestled among diamond-shaped nuggets of some of the best polenta we've ever savored. Imagine creamed corn reduced to an almost pudding-like texture with a slightly crispy coating. It made a great complement to the intense, dry, smoky flavor of the shrimp.

For one dessert (all are $7), we ordered the rice pudding. What arrived was a large plate decorated with blueberries, raspberries, a scoop of fruity sorbet, and four golden-brown pyramidal shapes. The "pudding," it turned out, was fried, but inside, a delicate, goat-cheese infused sweetness greeted our palates, merging with the *cajeta* (Mexican chocolate) caramel sauce. The ultra-foamy, dark Venezuelan El Rey chocolate mousse served, wittily, in a chocolate taco wafer was outstanding.

Pure Mexican, Masa is not. But if you crave dishes carefully prepared with chiles, limes, and smoky essences (*sin* beans and cheese), a trip to the South End beats a trek south of the border. ~ N.P.B.

MASA
439 Tremont Street
Boston. 617-338-8884.
Dinner only,
seven nights a week.
Valet parking.

Photograph by David Carmack

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