NEW YORK'S HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER

SHIHO FUKADA

Got a hankerin' for Mexican?

Darin Rubell knows the West Village; he grew up there. He knows Gramercy Park; he's lived there seven years. But when the 30-year-old scouted locations for his Mexican restaurant Mercadito, he only had eyes for the East Village.

"There's just so much food passion there," he says. "It's a perfect fit."

eats beat

Just about a month old, this snug spot, whose name means "little market," is already drawing crowds. They don't take reservations and there are just 24 seats, although a backyard expansion will add 35 more by January. On a Saturday, my friends and I arrived at 8:30 p.m. and didn't score seats at the bar until 9:45 p.m.

Was it worth the wait — and being jostled by staffers running behind us between the dining room and the kitchen?

Happily, yes.

Chunky-style guacamole and crispy chips ($7.50) made for an okay, but not stellar, start.

But with the arrival of the ceviches, a specialty of chef/co-owner Patricio Sandoval, things improved greatly. They cost $8 apiece, but I suggest the three-ceviche $18 sampler. Two must-tries: tuna with mango, onion and jicama; and shrimp with pineapple, coconut milk and mint. It's a tossup between the smoked mahimahi and the salmon; flip a peso. They're all terrific, and served with crispy homemade crackers.

Tacos are also tasty. We preferred grilled skirt steak and roasted chili and avocado salsa ($7.50) to the cactus salad and black-bean hash ($7).

In save-the-best-for-last fashion, fried oysters with sweet potato mash and corn salsa was our final taste of the night. Plump. Creamy. Crunchy. Sensational.

So much so we skipped dessert, which included flan, rice pudding and fruit carpaccio ($4-$6). Next time.

Joe Dziemianowicz

Mercadito, 179 Avenue B (between 11th and 12th Sts.), (212) 529-6490; Visa, MasterCard, Amex; Monday-Wednesday, 8 a.m.-11 p.m.; Thursday, 8 a.m.-midnight; Friday, 8 a.m.-1 a.m.; Saturday, 9 a.m.-1 a.m.; closed Sunday.

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