

Tequila Mockingbird

by Laura Kenyon



New Canaan is known for its quaint little shops, brick sidewalks, iron lamp posts and immaculate, tree-lined streets. But take a turn down Forest Street, the narrow corridor jutting rebelliously off Main Street, and you will find a place where the bricks are painted red ... and yellow, green and bubblegum pink.

Tequila Mockingbird is a quality Mexican restaurant, according to its Web site, started in 1993. With 39 brands and nearly 100 varieties of the Mexican liquor, ranging from \$6.50 to \$20 (not including the \$50 Herradura "Seleccion Suprema"), it is much more about the blue agave plant — the mother of all tequila — than anything related to Atticus Finch.

One Saturday evening, as my date and I stepped from the cement sidewalk outside to the cobblestone corridor inside, we found ourselves in a picture book Mexican courtyard.

Green palms, a stone fountain and a mosaic of Our Lady of Guadalupe (patron saint of the Americas depicted in nearly every corner of the restaurant) first welcomed us, followed closely by the bar. A small but festive room with several tables for sipping and snacking, it was already home to a few early birds.

We were greeted quickly and guided to the dining area, which reminded me of a piñata. Painted ceiling tiles, a mural of a Mexican fruit market, a room-length mirror and walls of coral, blue

and turquoise surrounded us, while Corona banners, candles, flowers in vases as big as guitars, papier mâché Jose Cuervo bottles and margarita glasses, religious ornaments, an ox skull and a giant blue marlin jumped out from all sides. I waited for a horde of men in ponchos and sombreros to run out screaming and slinging confetti.

They never came, of course, but after a sip of my margarita (on the rocks) I would have joined them. Not too salty, not too weak, served in a large glass and only \$6.50, it was perhaps the best margarita I've ever tasted. A real connoisseur may want to try it "original style" — made with any tequila on the menu for \$2 above its shot price. Just keep in mind the strawberry margarita, only served frozen, was neither as flavorful or as fun.

Our waiter, along with tortilla chips, salsa and salsa verde, came quickly to our little wooden table and wicker-type chairs (which my date immediately called uncomfortable, but he is 6-foot-4 and there are plenty of booths available). The salsa tasted like it came from a jar but the salsa verde was tasty and the chips were great — not too salty or greasy, and very fresh.

The guacamole appetizer (\$7.95), however, soon stole all of our attention. Served in a tortilla bowl and very good, although missing some sort of kick (we decided it was weak on either onions or peppers). We squeezed a bit





of lime onto the green chunks of avocado and it was good to go.

The short list of appetizers was limited to items that involved chips and the action of dipping. Tex Mex nachos, tostada nachos, chile con queso and goat cheese with olivata rounded out the other options.

Although our 6:30 p.m. reservation seemed unnecessary at first, by the time we finally pulled our eyes from the guacamole, there was not an open seat in the joint. The crowd – a smorgasbord of old friends, young friends, families, teenagers and couples of all ages – matched the flair of the eclectic decor.

The dinner menu offered the standard Mexican fare: tacos, enchiladas, burritos, chimichangas and tostadas (all \$14.95),

quesadillas (\$11.95 to \$14.95) and fajitas (\$12.95-19.95). However, it also had a few healthier options such as a chicken or vegetarian tortilla wrap (\$11.95, \$10.95) and Caesar salad with chicken, shrimp or steak (\$13.95-18.95) or grilled chicken breast (\$15.95). Some meatier choices were barbecued pork ribs or tenderloin (\$21.95, \$15.95), skirt steak (\$18.95) and a 10 oz. charcoal-grilled beef tenderloin fillet (\$27.95).

Six specials (\$13.95-19.95) including crab cakes, cod tacos, pork tacos al pastor ("the most popular tacos in Mexico City"), and a chicken recipe "from the annual Mole contest in Puebla, Mexico," were very tempting.

After considering the botana plate, which offers "little bites" of skirt steak, shrimp,

shredded pork, cheese enchilada, salsa, guacamole and beans (\$20.95), we decided on a combo plate (\$14.95) and the shrimp in chipotle sauce (\$19.95).

The chicken enchilada and beef chimichanga combo arrived 15 minutes later with rice, beans and salsa. Many of the rice pieces were still hard and the chimichanga, which is supposed to be served crispy, was on the soggy side. Aside from the casing, the beef was juicy and the enchilada sauce was good, but the chicken was a mix of white and dark meat.

The shrimp in chipotle sauce came with a decent amount of shrimp, a house salad, and the same, somewhat under-cooked, rice. The salad was good but ordinary and the shrimp did not taste as fresh as we would have liked, especially for the price.

I focused on the refried beans, filled up on more chips and guacamole, and noticed that a burrito at the next table looked far better (lightly browned and not soggy) than what was in front of me.

The service was very good, as our waiter was attentive but not overly so. Although dessert is not printed on the menu, he offered us a choice between ice cream or flan, a Spanish dessert of baked custard. Staring at the blown-up Corona plane dangling from the ceiling fan above me, I was in the mood for the full experience. Flan it was.

And it was good. Even after the bill was paid we found it hard to stop scooping

up the sweet, flavored liquid that was drizzled over and around the jiggly little custard.

Before crossing the border back into tranquil New Canaan, we debated grabbing another drink at the bar, which was open until 2 a.m. But with sizable holes in our pockets we decided to come back another time, probably not for dinner, but definitely for the guacamole and another fantastic offering from the blue agave plant.

And although there were no prominent references to Harper Lee's famous novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, I did spy a small, black bird watching silently over the festivities. Dare you to find him before you drain your first margarita.

photo credit: David Ames

WRAPPING IT UP

TEQUILA MOCKINGBIRD

LOCATION: 6 Forest Street, New Canaan.

HOURS: Monday through Thursday 5:30 p.m. to 10 p.m. (bar closes at 1 a.m.), Friday and Saturday 5:30 p.m. to 11 p.m. (bar closes at 2 a.m.), Sunday 5:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. (bar closes at midnight).

RESERVATIONS: A good idea.

CONTACT: 203-966-2222.

WEB SITE: www.culinarymenus.com/tequilamockingbird.htm.

