

Finding a true taste of Mexico in the woods of Maine

By Necee Regis
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

MOUNT DESERT ISLAND, Maine — Imagine this: You own a successful restaurant with 80 seats. You lose your lease and decide to build your dream restaurant, yet you scale it down to only 50 seats. The plan seems crazy, but that's exactly what Janet Strong and Bob Hoyt did when they moved their popular Mexican restaurant XYZ from the harbor on Shore Road to its current location in the woods of Manset.

For Strong and Hoyt, it's about quality, not quantity. "In 1994 we started on a mission. We're the only ones doing what we're doing, which is serving real Mexican food. We make everything from scratch," says Hoyt, who does all the preparation and cooking.

You won't find anything out of a bottle or a can here. All the salsas, marinades, seasoning pastes, and sauces are made on the premises from ingredients hauled back from Mexico on Strong and Hoyt's yearly visits, or, more recently, ordered on the Internet.

Strong and Hoyt have been traveling to Mexico since the early 1980s. What began as an inexpensive place to escape to during the cold Maine winter has turned into a passion about the country and its cuisine.

The name XYZ derives from Xalapa, Yucatán, and Zacatecas. The menu reflects foods from these places and others. "I'm doing . . . a rustic cuisine, something



TOM HERDE/GLOBE STAFF

The restaurant was designed to be as simple as possible by Bob Hoyt, the XYZ chef who is also a carpenter.

you'd find out on a ranch in the countryside. It's not what you'll find in Mexico City," says Hoyt.

For example, Xalapa, the capital of Veracruz, is home to the jalapeno, which, when smoked, is called a chipotle. (On most current

maps the town is spelled Jalapa. Using an "X" reflects the native Indian preference.)

"This region is known for smoking their peppers. It's common to find smoked chipotle salsa on the tables there," Strong says.

"Mexico is a diverse place. The farther south you go, the food gets more intense and complex," Hoyt says. "In the Yucatán, they dry chiles to make a black paste. They also make cochinito, pork rubbed with achiote paste, which adds a nutty flavor. And in Puebla, they make mole poblano, which originated from the kitchens of nuns in the colonial days."

Hoyt's enthusiasm is evident in a menu that changes weekly to keep both his clients and himself excited. On a stormy day in late July the menu had a color theme — green, red, black, and orange — and we tried the last two.

Pollo in Salsa Naranja, from the northern highlands of Michoacán, featured chicken thighs in a sublime orange sauce that was sharp, not sweet, like the essence of an orange. Pollo Negro, chicken thighs in a black sauce made with pasilla negra chiles, was a rustic dish originating in Oaxaca.

Of the several weekly choices for appetizers and entrees, only three stay in permanent rotation.

XYZ's chiles rellenos are made with dried chiles that have been rehydrated and are baked rather than fried. These are sometimes paired with camarones ajo (tiger shrimp with garlic, ancho, and poblano chiles). In addition, you'll always find the succulent beef ribs that are baked for five hours and are 9 to 10 inches long. ("People flip out when they see these long ribs. They're like from ["The Flintstones,"] Hoyt says.)

When Strong and Hoyt built the new restaurant, Hoyt, a carpenter as well as a chef, designed it to be as simple as possible.

"We were intrigued by places in Mexico where you'd drive down an odd road and there'd be this bubble of life. There are no real restaurants in the woods here on the island, except for in private clubs. We love the ranchito feel of the place. We even painted white on the . . . tree trunks, to give it a Third World feel," says Strong.

Indeed, one could miss the place while driving along Route 102A on the "quietside" of Mount Desert Island. A small sign points the way up a hill lined with scraggly pines where eventually you find the restaurant situated across from Strong and Hoyt's home.

The interior is lively; it has the feel of a spotless roadside cantina with a splash of whimsy and joie de vivre. The beadboard walls are a bright cherry red and match the napkins placed on colorful tablecloths. Everything, from the post-

ers on the wall to the ceramic sculpture and pottery, was brought back from Strong and Hoyt's Mexican journeys or given to them by patrons and friends.

Strong, who runs the front of the house, says that first-time patrons always ask if there's a Mexican cook in the kitchen.

"I tell them we have a Yankee," she says, and laughs.

Necee Regis can be reached at neceeregis@yahoo.com.

If you go . . .

XYZ

End of Bennett Lane, off Route 102A, Manset, Southwest Harbor Mount Desert Island, Maine 207-244-5221
Reservations recommended.
Dimmer only; hours vary. Weekends Memorial Day through June, after Labor Day through Columbus Day. Every night in July and August.



Waterfront
English Manor
estate from
another era.
Step back in time
and enjoy life
as it was...



Point Pleasant Inn & Resort

Bristol, Rhode Island

401.253.0627 www.pointpleasantinn.com

