

TASTE & TELL: N.L. ENGLISH

# XYZ knows the ABCs of fine Mexican cuisine

**M**ANSET — Craving new tastes can drive a person to travel far, but Mainers can find new tastes closer by in this pretty building in Manset, a part of Southwest Harbor.

The X for Xalapa, capital city of the Mexican state of Veracruz, the Y for Yucatan, a southeastern state on the Gulf of Mexico, and the Z for Zacatecas, a central state in the north, provide a quick geography lesson in the culinary influences here and a map of the places owners Robert Hoyt and Janet Strong travel to every winter, when the restaurant closes.

Started in 1994, this restaurant has built up a loving clientele and growing fame. In 2003 a move became necessary and a new building was built in 2004. Now the bright space with red wainscoting and floral tablecloths serves 80 a night, often turning customers without reservations away.

Hoyt runs the kitchen, orders the food and puts together meals like the chiles rellenos. "We're the only people who do them that way," Hoyt said. He rehydrates dried ancho chilies and stuffs them with cheese and corn or picadillo, a mixture of pork and beef and fruit.

My taste of chiles rellenos con queso, filled with corn in creamy cheese, revealed the meaty density of those chilies, darkly sweet, like a rich fruit that's not at all spicy, with the corn adding chewy, lighter sweetness.

A varied rainbow of chilies from sweet and red to green and hot gives each concoction its own savory, bright, spicy and mild fla-

vors, adding their umami, a fifth flavor of savory richness, to many of the dishes. The meat is long cooked and tender, the vegetables are fresh. Salads that accompany every entrée are small, with tender, fine lettuce and snappy dressing.

All entrées are \$22, a bid for simplicity, an aversion to numbers like \$21.95, and another advantage to eating here.

Bartenders must labor hard each night to make enough margaritas (\$6.50 for the "XYZ," \$10 with 100 percent agave tequila and Cointreau) to slake the amazing thirst for them at all the tables and at the small bar. The mixture of freshly squeezed limes, rich with pulp, and simple syrup makes the Sauza Blanco tequila and Triple Sec taste brilliant.

Eighteen-hundred pounds of limes are squeezed here in the summer — making XYZ its supplier's biggest buyer of limes by far.

A half-carafe of the Sangria (\$10 for three glasses) holds rich fruit juices, again with the texture of pulp announcing they are freshly squeezed, mixed with a mild red wine and unusually refreshing. Beers, six of them Mexican and four nonalcoholic (all \$3.50), and a house red and white wine (\$6 a glass, \$20 for a carafe) are served, along with three 100 percent agave tequilas for drink purists.

We missed, arriving at a late hour, appetizers like quesos fundido (\$8), with XYZ pork chorizo and melted Monterrey Jack on flour tortillas; or the Chile verde (\$8), fresh roasted green chilies



Courtesy of XYZ

**Business is brisk** during the summer months at XYZ, which is open nightly 5:30 to 9 in Southwest Harbor.

with cotija cheese — they were both out.

"I make everything from scratch every morning so you're bound to run out," said Hoyt.

But a bowl of the cold avocado soup, slightly sweet with a whiff of tequila, was smooth and rich. The beef tongue in vinaigrette (\$8), Lengua en escabeche, held its slightly gelatinous, mild meat in a tart dressing, making a perfect start.

The menu I encountered on my visit (it changes frequently) was partially arranged by the color of the sauce. The Negro (Spanish for black) was chicken served with a sauce of pasilla chilies, dark indeed. The tender

chicken meat contrasted its mildness to the sauce's intensity, while the sauce's texture, thick and vegetable but not at all heavy, created the illusion of richer meat.

Pollo con Salsa Naranja, chicken in an orange sauce, was made with oranges, ancho chilies and hot de arbol chilies. Hoyt said the sauce shows the merging of the Spanish — through Morocco, with its affection for fruit and meat dishes — and Mexican cuisine. The sweet taste of oranges came as one note of a harmonious whole, not at all sticky or sugary. White rice, also served with most dishes, gave the palate momentary rest.

The verde, or green, entrée was pork with tomatillos, chile poblano and chile California, mixed with ground almonds. White rice and black beans alongside, with cilantro and red onions, made this mild dish aromatic, sharp and brilliant in flavor.

These meals, unusual in Down East Maine, are easy to love, but Hoyt speaks modestly about their making. "We're not doing anything outrageous," he said. "We're just making things from scratch."

We ended with two of the three desserts. Frozen lime pie (\$8), an icy lime cream, took a moment to reveal its sharp sweetness. The great flan (\$8) was quicker to get

**HOW IT RATES**

**XYZ RESTAURANT**, Bennett Lane at 80 Seawall Road (Route 102A), Manset, Southwest Harbor, 207-244-5221

**RATING: ★★★★★**

**HOURS:** Open nightly in the summer 5:30 to 9. After Labor Day open Friday and Saturday. Closed after "Day of the Dead," Halloween, reopens Memorial Day

**CREDIT CARDS:** Visa and MC

**PRICE RANGE:** All entrées \$22

**VEGETARIAN DISHES:** Yes

**RESERVATIONS:** Highly recommended

**BAR:** Full

**WHEELCHAIR ACCESS:** Yes

**BOTTOM LINE:** This bright restaurant introduces diners on Mount Desert Island to the rich flavors of chilies, tender stewed chicken and pork, and the brilliance of limes, to name just a few revelations.

★★★★★ Outstanding  
 ★★★★ Very good      ★★★ Good  
 ★★ Fair      ★ Poor

to know, its tender custard set upside down in its own pool of caramel. This silky version was a favorite at the table.

Still to be tasted is the "Justly Famous" XYZ pie (\$8), layered with coffee and butter pecan ice cream, topped with chocolate sauce and whipped cream.

Audience welcomes letters from Taste & Tell readers. Address letters to Eric Blom, features editor, Maine Sunday Telegram, P.O. Box 1460, Portland 04104; e-mail: [features@pressherald.com](mailto:features@pressherald.com)