



TUESDAY, OCTOBER 28, 2008

- PAPERMAG.COM
- pm(NYC)
- PARTY SNAPS
- BLOGS
- PAPER TV
- PAPER STORE
- DAILY TIPS
- ART EXHIBITS
- BARS
- BEAUTY
- CLUBS
- FOOD
- CONCERTS
- MOVIES
- READINGS
- SHOPS
- SPORTS & OUTDOORS

FOOD

FIND

RESTAURANTS

BY KEYWORD

by Category

by Neighborhood

GO

MERCADITO CANTINA

172 Avenue B., (212) 388-1750.

Craving killer tacos? Then head to Mercadito Cantina, a mod taqueria which opened in the East Village earlier this summer, across the street from the original Mercadito -- but which features a different menu and vibe. Here, it's all about communal and counter seating, grazing and drinking. The clean design comes by way of the Northern Michigan woods, the ceiling and nearly every surface lined with beautiful blonde cedar. Our corner of the counter filled up quickly with little bowls of bright, freshly made salsa, chips and crispy corn bread nuggets (\$3.50) that I'd compare to hush puppies, but better. There are eight salsas to choose from (\$2.50 for one; \$4.50 for two; \$6.50 for three), with ingredients like toasted peanuts, capers, pickled jalapenos and roasted garlic. Think there's only one kind of guacamole? Mercadito offers six flavors (two for \$10.50; three for \$13.50), from traditional to mole poblano to Oaxaqueno with mango. My favorite of the batch, however, was the "sandia," a green blend of tomatillo, habanero chiles, epazote and bits of sweet watermelon. Chef and co-owner Patricio Sandoval devised a number of flavorful fillings for his soft tacos, too, like one with zesty homemade green sausage, manchego cheese and tomatillo. Tilapia fish tacos and calamari tacos with plantain salsa were also terrific finger food, and yes, the juice from them will drip all over your hands so have napkins ready (\$8.50 for two tacos). A duo called the Tippling Brothers (Paul Tanguay and Tad Carducci) were forced to get creative with the cocktail list since the community board denied Mercadito Cantina a full liquor license. Instead of tequila, get a shot of tric-quila, sake infused with smoky peppers that bears a resemblance to the real thing but lacks the kick. No matter how much I drank, I stayed sober, but at least that way I was able to fully appreciate the delicious food.

Julie Besonen



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