

# S I L O P O I N T

## **Contemporary cantina at Silo Point is a casual place with big menu, unusual fare**

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Miguel's Cocina y Cantina is on the ground floor of Silo Point, a luxury condominium project that looms (that's the only word) eerily over the modest rowhouses of the surrounding Locust Point neighborhood.

To get the full incongruous effect, try approaching it first, if you can, via the free Water Taxi Harbor Connector that runs on weekdays between Fells Point and Tide Point. It's a short walk from the landing through an industrial-residential mix, and by the time you get there you'll have built up an appetite for novelty and adventure.

You'll need it.

Miguel's is a casual place with a very big menu, and at least half the items are things that no other restaurant in Baltimore is serving in quite the same way. The contemporary cantina setting is meant to be carefree and relaxing. But the dense menu merits careful study and planning, and unless you come very hungry, you're liable to skip over entire menu categories. Not making it all the way to the carne asada, one of six entrees, or plato fuertes, would be a crying shame.

Before the entrees, though, under a general heading of small plates, are groupings of tacos and tostadas, quesadillas, empanadas, flautas and taquitos, and especiales. And before all these, a small selection of appetizers, soups, and salads. Mental stamina will help - just getting through the six-page specialty drink menu is a little exhausting. This is less of a problem if you plan to return here, and I think you will. It was a problem for me in that I came there as a reviewer, with a category-spanning agenda.

Miguel's Cocina y Cantina is Michael Marx's second restaurant presenting and celebrating authentic regional cuisines of Mexico. The first was Federal Hill's Blue Agave, which Marx sold in 2005. Rub, his Texas-style barbecue joint, opened in 2006 in Riverside. Like those restaurants, Miguel's is straight from Marx's sincere heart, a passionately wrought product of his frequent and immersive travels. Marx's enthusiasm is the best thing about his restaurants, especially this newest one, where it feels like nothing that Marx has experienced himself has been watered down or held back for fearful gringo tongues.

So at Miguel's, there are five styles of moles, innumerable peppers, dried fruits and squashes, and the house specialty, Tostados de Chapulines, mini tostadas with guacamole and dried grasshoppers.

I thought the setting, and the service, got in the way of the experience somewhat. You can admire what's been done to warm up the narrow, high-ceilinged dining space with Day of the Dead murals and adobe constructions, but these flourishes are not generally in your line of sight when you're dining, and I don't think you feel their presence. (The central bar, where I sat on a second visit, is a better vantage point.) The table service is a little rushed. I think, over time, I would adjust to its breezy pace, but on a first visit, I felt I needed more hand-holding, a little more guidance and advice. I felt overwhelmed by choices and unsure where to start.

A drink wouldn't hurt either. Start with a michelada, a salted-glass full of iced beer mixed, in one version, with Worcestershire, fresh lime juice and chile de arbol powder; a Horritos Plata-based margarita mixed with tamarind, prickly pear; or the house specialty, fresh lime juice and Squirt.

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Then choose an appetizer, maybe just one, like feathery buttermilk corn cakes topped with chipotle-grilled shrimp and whipped chipotle butter. But then you'd miss the perfect guacamole, simple and fresh, with Serrano chiles, cilantro, lime juice, and salt. Skip the salad, or soup? I'd hate to have missed out on the complex pleasures of a citrus-spiked warm cactus salad or the refreshing Pozole Sinaloa, chicken, hominy, radishes and cilantro in a deep ancho-chile broth.

Among the various small plates, made each day in limited quantities, I'm glad I chose the Birria Guadalajara, an especial that coats braised lamb in a three-chile sauce, and the disarmingly good picadillo, an empanada stuffed with diced beef and pork, almonds, walnuts, olives and cloves. I'd have given up our flauta, but the others might be better than the bland hongas, which is stuffed with a roasted mushrooms, cactus, epazote leaves and tomatillo sauce; or our quesadilla Veracruz, in which shrimp, bacon, pumpkinseed and mole verde add up to surprisingly little. Next time, I'd devote more time to the tacos, based at least on how much I loved the Tacos de Carne, made with Dos Equis-soaked brisket, spiced with serrano peppers.

Or maybe I'd just go directly from margaritas and complimentary chips and salsas to the carne asada entree, served with a gravy-like mole Amarillo, arroz verde and achiote calabaza, the most satisfying Mexican dish I've had in a Mexican restaurant anywhere; but I'd want you to try, just for kicks, something Marx discovered himself, the carnitas Juvenico, which uses pork slow-roasted in a Coca-Cola marinade.

At this pace, with many plates, and so much happening on each of them, you fall into a dream state. Maybe that's why for dessert, we passed up chocolate-ancho bread pudding and a tequila-laced milkshake in favor of not-so-amazing churros and lime pound cake. And because my only real reservation about Miguel's is that too much comes at you too fast, you might just read the menu online before you go.