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ACCOLADES

Mpls St Paul

DINING OUT: REVIEW,
Peter Lilienthal



THE SCENE At this new downtown Mexican restaurant, there are no sombreros or maracas hanging on the walls, no TVs tuned to Hispanic soaps. Then again, this isn't just any taqueria. Rather, it's a south-of-the-border cantina as modeled by D'Amico & Partners, whose chic vision converts to a bright, high-ceilinged space livened with blown-glass light fixtures, colored tile floors and wainscoting, parachute-cloth hangings and a smattering of elongated wall paintings. The collection of close-quartered tables and high-back, narrow-beamed wooden chairs crescents around an open-to-view kitchen, while floor-to-ceiling windows front the bustling downtown location, kitty-corner from Orchestra Hall. As for the diners, they run the gamut from boisterous families to suited execs from the Target HQ that rises above the restaurant.

OUR TAKE When it comes to designing and executing restaurant concepts, Richard and Larry D'Amico and executive chef Jay Sparks don't make many mistakes. And Masa is no exception. **IT'S OBVIOUS THAT A LOT OF THOUGHT AND EFFORT HAS GONE INTO THE MENU**, which is definitely a step above the typical pseudo collection of fajitas, burritos, and chimichangas. Chalk that up to the presence of Mexican-born chef Saul Chavez. Indeed, there aren't many local alternatives where aficionados can feast on pozole verde (pork and hominy stew) or fresh, pliant corn tortillas piled high with shreds torn from a

wonderful roast of marinated pork shoulder baked in a banana leaf or indulge in a rich, smoky chowder of corn, roasted poblano, and shrimp. Though the spicing here has been criticized by some as too mild, Mexican cuisine often bears little resemblance to the cliché that is recognized in many places such as Minnesota. Balance and robustness is the primary hallmark of Mexican food, with spice levels varying regionally across the country and from dish to dish. But if the heat doesn't satisfy you, ask for a cup of the incendiary habañero salsa. The service staff is well trained, which is typical of a D'Amico operation.

3 GREAT PLATES

TOSTADITAS CON CARNITAS This appetizer of crisp corn tortillas mounded with a combination of pulled roast pork, avocado, cilantro, and onion can be messy to eat, but is definitely worth the crumbly risk.

PESCADO CON CHILE ANCHO-PIQUIN SALSA It's hard to be disappointed by these fillets of broiled sea bass, lightly glazed with an ancho-and-piquin-chili blend and accompanied by pleasing sides of pico de gallo and cilantro rice.

FLAN DE COCO Forget what you think about flan—this velvety rendition is perfectly textured and alive with the taste of coconut.

**BEST RESTAURANTS:
CRITICS CHOICE, ETHNIC
DINING, Peter Lilienthal**

I can stay at home and grill a steak, roast a chicken, or boil up a bowl of pasta. But what I can't do as easily is grind out a great green curry paste, mix up a rich batch of mole, or ferment a helping of fiery kimchi. Preparing ethnic specialties takes time, skill, and countless ingredients. Trying to narrow down the field to ten is a challenge of the first order, but the following picks are places that are uniformly interesting, reliable, and authentic. Their food is distinctive and, most of the time, easy on the pocketbook.

MASA Although there are a number of great little Mexican taquerias scattered along Eat Street and East Lake Street, the Mexican story of the year is upscale and downtown. That's how D'Amico & Partners chose to dive into regional Mexican cooking.

CHEF SAUL CHAVEZ DESERVES HIGH MARKS FOR AUTHENTICITY AND STYLISH PRESENTATIONS OF CLASSIC RECIPES. And despite the high-rent location, prices are surprisingly modest.

RUNNER UP, RESTAURANT OF THE YEAR, A.Z.

The year 2005 was marked by spectacular openings. Never before have so many ambitious food-focused restaurants arrived in a single half-year. In any other year, these three would have been our Restaurant of the Year.

MASA, the latest offering from D'Amico & Partners, celebrates regional and contemporary Mexican cookery in a (relatively) luxurious setting—a first for the Twin Cities. Los Hermanos D'Amico developed the concept almost by accident while debating the merits of competing with themselves by opening yet another Italian restaurant. Executive chef Jay Sparks and chef Saul Chavez have combined a designer's penchant for spare plating with rootsy and rustic recipes. The flavors are big and bold, deftly complemented by a thrilling tequila and sangria list. The setting is the soaring white and citrus-toned room that used to house Field's Marketplace Café in Target's HQ. Masa gets big points for thinking outside the box, then nailing it.

