



Diego Lends a Fresh Flair to Mexican Dining at MGM Grand, Las Vegas



By Michelle White

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Diego, the MGM Grand's newest restaurant, presents authentic regional Mexican cuisine in a unique and appetizing manner. Lest those other senses start to envy your taste buds, a distinctive setting is sure to divert your other senses as well. If variety is the spice of life, there's plenty of all three to be found at Diego, in its strong start since its establishment in June 2004.



I felt at ease in the predominantly red dcor, with clean lines and discreet track lighting. Walls and floors, candleholders encasing a single candle at every table, and simple hanging lights above the tables were all red. Intimate red booths provided the feel of your own cozy nook within a happening hotspot. Some tables were adorned with a tank of rising bubbles illuminated by multicolored lights.

My meal began with Diego's six signature salsas, all wood-fire roasted and grilled, presented in a mobile cart for my choice of three for the table. I chose the sweetly refreshing mango salsa, salsa verde, and the spiciest of the six - chipotle. However, I couldn't resist asking for the real spice - habanero, apparently the hottest pepper in the world, which was brought to me with fair warning. I avoided too much pain by carefully heeding the admonitions to enjoy it sparingly.

The first drink I chose was the Bloody Maria, having gained a taste for good spicy ones in the South. Diego's version was made from Gran Centenario Silver Tequila mixed with house made Bloody Mary mix and fresh lemon. I found it appropriately spicy, as good as I've had in Las Vegas or Los Angeles. My companion chose El Diablo, which was much sweeter than it sounds! Consisting of Patron Reposado tequila, cr'me de cassis, ginger beer, and freshly squeezed lime, this drink was seriously smooth, almost like cream soda.

Diego takes pride in their tequila. Tequila Master Julio Bermejo - the sole American to receive this prestigious title from the Mexican government - oversees Diego's extensive collection. His perfectionism is represented in Diego's promotion of only 100% Blue Agave tequila, as tequila was when it was first made, before current regulations turned to mass production and profit over authenticity and quality. The tequila menu, organized by region, includes bottles that are not available anywhere else in the United States, and even tequilas that are no longer in production. The impressive bar features two vertical conveyor belts that serve both functional and aesthetic purposes, rotating systematically to display the grand tequila selection.



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Vicente Wolf, the 2003 James Beard Winner for Restaurant Design, created the contemporary design, utilizing vivid colors and several water elements. The generous space is partially divided by walls with cutouts and columns, lending the feel of being at home within your own comfort territory yet still surrounded by plenty of space and high ceilings.

The restaurant was named for Diego Rivera, who was considered the greatest Mexican painter of the twentieth century. In the future the projection screens that currently display nature images such as fruit and fresh vegetables will show slides of Rivera's artwork.

The staff was friendly and disarming, full of enthusiasm and information about the restaurant and its offerings. The waiters assured me that they like for their patrons to be adventurous, and not to be afraid to try new things! And if something does not hold up to the patron's expectations, it is no problem to exchange it for something else. The Monday-night crowd was fairly diverse, many looking as though they were in Las Vegas for business and were happy to relax at Diego!

Another remarkable signature item of Diego is their Guacamole de Lujo (Tableside Guacamole). A guacamole artista - with a dashing smile, I might add - deftly proceeded to whip up organic avocados, sundried tomatoes, cilantro, fresh key lime, onion, and serrano pepper into a fine guacamole, revealing he will take extra time to ensure the texture is as smooth as butter. And yes, it was as good as it sounds.

One entree of note was the Arroz a la Tumbada, a brothy Mexican "paella" studded with shrimp, scallops, mussels, calamari, white rice, roasted tomatoes, and habanero molcajete. Although the dish was a bit salty, the seafood tasted as though it was very high quality. Other signature entrees include Carne Asada a la Tapatia, beef ribeye marinated in red chile adobo, grilled over wood fire with tequila-dressed roasted cactus-onion "salsa" and black beans, and Pollo al Horno con Mole, wood-oven roasted chicken with oaxacan red mole, gulf-style white rice, green beans, crispy onion strings, and toasted sesame seeds. The sublime combinations of ingredients were inspired by the street stalls of urban Mexico, the vendors of market towns and the matchless essence of home-fire cooking.

The Diego menu also features organic vegetable sampling, as they support the efforts of immigrant farmers and their ability to produce organic vegetables that are free of pesticides. I tried the Mixiote de Hongos al Guajillo, wood-grilled mushrooms with chochoyotes, spicy guajillo chile, roasted garlic, tomato and epazote slow-roasted in a parchment package. This was an exquisite blend of flavors to be savored slowly.

Diego is notable for creative uses of fresh ingredients, such as the mangoes in their signature salsa and in Camarones al Tequila, grilled chipotle shrimp with golden tequila glaze, avocado, grilled mango, and salsa mexicana.

Even the dessert menu offers a broad range of delectable choices such as flan, a Mexican must-have, but this Flan de Canela consists of Mexican cinnamon flan, rum splash, candied pumpkin seeds, and cinnamon tuile. Also, Nieves de Frutas offer sorbets in such mouthwatering flavors as coconut-lime, mango-orange zest, and strawberry-mint.

While the prices seemed slightly steep relative to the portions, the taste is certainly a testament to the dedicated work put into it. And the restaurant is a worthy visit even just for the small plates and the drinks. Take a break from the bars to experience the spaciousness, the fresh ambiance and unique drinks of Diego. The signature Diego margarita consists of Herradura Silver Tequila, Citronage, fresh sour, and freshly squeezed lime, and achieved the desirable combination of being both strong and smooth. In addition to the top-notch margaritas which even include a \$100 margarita made from Patron Platinum Tequila, Diego serves up specialty drinks such as the Watermelon Cooler, a blend of El Tesoro Silver Tequila, fresh watermelon juice and fresh sour mix. This drink was refreshingly pure, and not too sweet, as overdone watermelon flavors can be.

Traditional Mexican sambas provided the sonic ambiance, with the flair of invigorating horns. What with

Season Finale

9:00 PM | Victory Lap Variety Show !

Wednesday May 21st

12:00 PM | Free LOST Exhibit at The Paley Center for Media in Beverly Hills, For a Limited Time Only!

7:30 PM | Tartuffe: South Coast Repertory Season Finale

8:00 PM | Surely Lorraine's Anime Wong at Malo's Silver Lake Sessions

Thursday May 22nd

12:00 PM | Free LOST Exhibit at The Paley Center for Media in Beverly Hills, For a Limited Time Only!

7:30 PM | Hovorostovsky @ LA Opera

8:00 PM | Tartuffe: South Coast Repertory Season Finale

9:30 PM | Comedy Palace

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the inspiration for movement that their signature drinks in plural may stir up, Diego perhaps overlooked one thing - they could use a dance floor!

My experience of Diego was completed by a treat I'd never had before - a margarita Popsicle. Helado de Nieves and Raspadillos (fruit sorbet tequila shooters) combine the libation with the luscious indulgence of a tropical dessert for double the pleasure.



Diego is part of the MGM Grand's stellar lineup of restaurants. Reservations are accepted by calling 702.891.3200. For more information, check out www.mgmgrand.com.

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