

MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local
restaurant review

MonteAlban connects Oaxacan heritage to the plate

Review and photos by MOUTH
OF THE COLUMBIA

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I've squawked about menus a lot lately — particularly those at some Mexican restaurants. You know the ones: They're pages long and vastly overstuffed with sometimes hundreds of similar dishes.

It's in that same vein that I want to praise MonteAlban — as much for what the Mexican restaurant offers as for what it doesn't.

What the Astoria restaurant mercifully avoids is that familiar deluge. There are no combo meals or hard-shell tacos. There aren't even burritos (save one for breakfast).

The dinner menu carries just 14 entries, plus a handful of additions — like street-style tacos, sopes and other starters, which are available all day. And while just about every Mexican restaurant in the region plasters the word "authentic" on signs and menus, MonteAlban actually connects its Oaxacan heritage to the table with a handful of regional dishes.

Will any of them blow your socks off? Maybe. Maybe not. But we're certainly moving in the right direction. With so many carbon-copied, Americanized Mexican restaurants in the region, trimming and connecting the menu counts as a win. Resistance is not futile.

Still, MonteAlban is not wholly *sui generis*. With the pastel palette and the fake plants, design familiarity abounds. And, yeah, there are hamburgers and, somewhat more head-scratchingly, a Denver omelette in the breakfast section. Meals too begin with free chips and salsa. Or, rather, a pair of not-very-hot sauces. I preferred the pointy, acidic, green, tomatillo-based sauce to its black-hole-dark, smoky red partner. Neither were particularly spicy. The



Above: Delivering Pozole bedside in lieu of chicken soup would be welcome.

Right: The Cecina Plate's pork was good, though the Mouth found the cactus salad wanting.

Margarita (\$7), too, was routine — syrupy, reasonably strong, sloshing around in a hot-tub-sized glass.

The first left turn was the Picadita (\$3), a cousin of the *sopes* with a few critical twists. Rather than fried, the puffy corn tortilla is grilled, affording a crisp crust and pillowy center. Upon it rested black beans, cotija cheese crumbles and meat. At the server's suggestion I chose pastor (pork), which was juicy and fibrous. But what bound the billowing, fluffy pillow was a drizzle of olive oil, a flavor I've found rarely in Mexican food and one that added depth and dimension.

I continued following the server's advice. Without hesitation he pointed toward the Mole Oaxaqueño and Cecina Plate as his favorite entrées.

The Mole Oaxaqueño (\$14) boasted mole from Oaxaca and white rice, though it arrived with MonteAlban's regular, very lightly seasoned Spanish rice. The mole sauce was dark, thick and rich, a midnight storm of influences — fruity, nutty, chocolatey with a creeping heat. The thick, almost unmoving slick enveloped three wallet-sized hunks of chicken and then some. Even with the rice, the sauce overwhelmed



the plate. It was mysterious in its bottomless depth, and I reveled in playing archeologist, trying to unearth the many components. But for dinner it was too sweet for my taste. I longed for something to stare down the mole, to cut it. It could've been veggies or hot sauce, which I wondered about — "Do you have any special homemade hot sauce?" I asked. My server pointed back toward the two that came with the chips, red and green. That was all MonteAlban had to share. Later that evening as I left, I noticed my server in the kitchen having a shift meal. On the table were bottles of numerous grocery-store-bought hot sauces — Cholula, Tapatio, Tabasco. Indeed, they knew but held out.

The Cecina Plate (\$14) was much more my speed. The thin, wide pork slabs were salty, slathered in the smoky, dark red sauce that mixed better with meat than with tortilla chips. Along for the ride were more Spanish rice, refried beans, as well as pinches of bitter cactus, shredded lettuce, tomato, cilantro and onion that more embodied accoutrements than the described "cactus salad." The helping of avocado was about

a tablespoon's worth. Still, the pork was dandy.

On another visit I tried the *Sopes* (\$3). It was salty, savory and creamy cool, a good deal more food than a \$2 taco. But it left me pining for another Picadita.

I also had the Pozole (\$10), whose smudged writing on the "Specials" board suggested a near permanent availability. The salad-sized bowl of tomato-and-onion-centric broth was filled with chunks of sinewy pork and chicken and kernels of grainy hominy. On the side were onions, cilantro, cabbage and jalapeños, plus three flat, crunchy corn tortillas you could crinkle into the bowl as you pleased. A squeeze of lime opened the thing up. Even without the add-ons, what came in the bowl was a substantial meal. With a comfortable, hearty, warming simplicity, delivering Pozole bedside in lieu of chicken soup would be quite welcome.

Finally I zagged back to one of the menu's handful of Oaxacan offerings, the Tlayudas (\$16). The thin, white corn tortilla, which came from the region, was baked to a wafer-like crisp. It was enormous — bigger than any I've ever seen; the size of a platter, nearly enough to wrap around a foot-

MONTEALBAN

Rating: ★ ★ ★

2975 Marine Drive, Astoria

PHONE: 503-741-3013

HOURS: 9 a.m. to 8 p.m.
Tuesday through Saturday; 10
a.m. to 8 p.m. Sunday

PRICE: \$ – Entrées range
from \$10 to \$16

VEGETARIAN/VEGAN

OPTIONS: A few vegetarian
pockets to be found

SERVICE: Adequate

DRINKS: Cocktails, Mexican
soda

KEY TO STAR RATING SYSTEM

- ★ Poor
- ★★ Below average
- ★★★ Good
- ★★★★ Excellent
- ★★★★★ Best in region

ball twice. My server described the dish as something akin to a "tortilla pizza." At first the size seemed fun. But it made more sense as a shared appetizer — which it is, traditionally — than one person's dinner. There was a spread of black bean paste that was woefully thin, plus shredded cabbage and an irresistible white Oaxacan quesillo cheese. Melted, it stretched cinematically like something from a commercial. Somewhat strangely, the wide, thin flank steak — I chose beef — was served whole in the center, rather than sliced and spread about the massive area.

Indeed, the Tlayudas wasn't the most successful or tantalizing dish I had at MonteAlban — that honor goes to the Picadita. But the mere fact that there's an actual through-line connecting Oaxaca to the table in Astoria — rather than simply piling on more burritos and enchiladas — is worthwhile in itself.