

ELEGANT ACCENTS

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Master Restaurateur John Tunney Creates Top Dining Experiences

by Lila Cook

When asked why he's been called a maverick, restaurateur John Tunney, III, laughs. "Well," he says, "until a few years ago, I had a long pony tail. And I'm an owner-operator-designer-builder. Most people don't do all of those jobs. I don't conform. I believe in creating a really good experience for people; money for me comes second. I work for what the public needs rather than what I want at any given time. I closed a perfectly busy restaurant that was always full and had two- to three-hour waits. Not only that, I closed it in the busiest season. People thought I was crazy."

The place that Tunney closed was Blue Honu, an award-winning Huntington, New York, restaurant that had been lauded by Zagat and other publications from the time it opened in 2001. The reason he shuttered it? Tunney had a vision of a new and better eatery, Honu Kitchen and Cocktails. In 17 days, he gutted the site completely and re-opened it, once again with two-hour wait times.

"What I wanted to provide here was big nights, small plates"—his spin on Spanish tapas, says the restaurateur. "This is the American version, a little bigger than an appetizer, smaller than an entrée. I love food, and I'd rather have multiple tastes than just one

dish. Depending on the cooking time, one dish follows another, as we make them, or they may come out several at a time. These small dishes tickle the senses, stimulate the palate."

The Honu concept also delivers good value, Tunney explains. "Take the lamb chops. We give half a rack. That's four chops, which is not so small. In some restaurants, they might charge \$35 for it; we charge between \$16 and \$18, depending on the market."

Like its predecessor, Honu impressed diners and critics alike. Writing for *The New York Times*, Joanne Sturkey rated the restaurant "Excellent," and went on to say that "Honu's all grown up, with a menu to match." She described the sea scallops with cantaloupe and the goat cheese agnolotti as outstanding picks.

The menu of small plates, under the command of executive chef Matthew Lake and chef de cuisine Paul Miranda, has 21 other choices. Among them are beef tenderloin with Maytag potato puree; skirt steak with romesco and red onions; lamb chops, cassoulet, and gremolata; chicken, potato, and cipollini onion; aragón, pistachio, and goat cheese; duck, grits, and greens; and crisp crust mac 'n' cheese. Sides include fries with sea salt and herbs; garlic estamame; and artichokes and mint and asparagus a



The diner at Honu features dark wood floors, crystal chandeliers and plush tufted fabrics.





A half rack of lamb chops is one of the 21 small plates on Hona's menu.

la plancha. For dessert, diners are presented with individual bags of warm, chewy chocolate chip cookies. Those who want more can choose from such treats as Key lime tart, peach and blueberry cobbler, and mixed berries with cream.

The décor at Hona, which is owned by John Tunney in partnership with his brother, David Tunney, and John Kiegot, is as elegant as the menu, with dark wood floors, crystal chandeliers, and jewel-tone fabrics.

Another restaurant success established by the same triumvirate is Besito. The Times' Starkey lauded it as "Long Island's premier Mexican restaurant," and praised its décor, designed by John

Tunney, as "a blending of rustic Old Mexico and an art deco styling." There are no sombreros or pilatas at Besito, which means "little kid" in Spanish. Tunney spent six months south of the border, researching every aspect of Mexican dining. He came up with dimly lit dining rooms with dramatic eucalyptus beams in the ceilings, richly colored banquettes, wrought iron wall sconces, vivid artwork, and interesting Mexican artifacts.

The Times review made it clear that while the décor and service were impressive, "...it was the food that ran away with top honors." Nonetheless, Tunney isn't content to rest on his laurels. "We're packed at the restaurant, but I think we can be better," he observes. "I still travel to Mexico, and when my management people go there on vacation, I'll give them a couple of extra days of vacation or some other incentive so they will also research the food."

A glimpse at the menu reveals such tasty entrées (appetizers) as guacamole on molcajete, the signature avocado dip prepared tableside and served with fresh tortillas and chips. Starkey said the sopa de tortilla—a traditional tortilla soup with avocado, white onion, queso Chihuahua, chopped cilantro, and toasted panita chile—surpassed any version she had eaten in Mexico. Another critic, Peter Gianotti of Newsday, gave a thumbs-up to the croche of the day.

Platos principales (entrees) include eschaltado de mole poblano, soft corn tortillas filled with shredded chicken, baked in mole, and topped with queso fresco and sliced onion; filet de ave, seared beef tenderloin with a tortilla and queso fresco crust with chipotle pepian, wild mushrooms, and lingering potatoes; and pescado Veracruzana, fresh fish cooked in Veracruz sauce made with tomatoes, sweet peppers, olives, and capers. For dessert, all diners are treated to a homemade choco, a long spiral of fried dough rolled in cinnamon and sugar. Other sweet options



Besito has been hailed by The New York Times as "Long Island's premier Mexican restaurant."



Honu's Golden Snapper With Sunchoke Purée And Tomatoes
Yield: Serves 4

Ingredients

- 4 5-oz. snapper filets, skin on
- 6 sunchokes, peeled
- 2 cloves garlic, roasted
- 6 oz. heavy cream
- 1 pt. grape tomatoes
- 8 oz. extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 sprigs each: thyme, rosemary, and sage
- 1 bunch of chives, chopped

Method

For the sunchoke purée:

Place sunchokes in a saucepan, cover with water, and simmer till tender. Add garlic and cream, and return to simmer. Remove from heat, place in blender, and purée till smooth. Season mixture with sea salt.

The sunchoke purée may be made a day in advance and gently reheated when needed.

For the tomatoes:

Wash tomatoes and dry well. Place in an oven-proof baking dish and cover with olive oil. Add the sprigs of fresh herbs. Cover dish and bake at 250 degrees until tomatoes are tender. Spoon tomatoes out of the excess oil and cool to room temperature. Strain the olive oil and reserve. When the oil cools, place in blender with chives; purée till smooth.

The tomatoes may be cooked in advance; cooled in the oil, they will keep refrigerated for up to four days. The tomatoes are also useful in simple pasta preparations. Before serving, bring tomatoes to room temperature and separate them from the excess oil. Purée oil in blender with chives.

To assemble the dish:

Heat a nonstick sauté pan. Add a little olive oil and sear the snapper filets, skin side down. Season fish with salt and pepper. Cook filets until skin is golden brown and crispy. Turn fish over and continue to sear till filets are cooked through. Place 2 oz. of the sunchoke purée on the bottom of the serving plates. Place the fish on top of the purée, divide the tomatoes atop the fish, drizzle with the chive oil, and serve.

include citrus-infused tres leches cake garnished with fresh berries, and house-made crepes layered with Mexican chocolate and served with cajeta caramel and fresh whipped cream. For diners who crave something stronger, the restaurant's Agave Lounge has an extensive list of 40 tequilas, all from Mexico.

Besito's success, like Honu's, is the result of long and careful planning, and extensive kitchen testing. The rave reviews weren't accidental, either. "A review should resemble what the public experiences," Tanney says. "It shouldn't be on the first day, not when you have so many systems involved in a restaurant. For example, if you have a computer glitch, you have big problems. To make sure we could give the public the experience we wanted, we combed all the meals served during the week we first opened Besito." (If a restaurant isn't charging for meals, it can't be reviewed.) "We used that week to get the public's reaction. That's our way of getting it right."

"Third-party conversations are what I live by," continues Tanney. "That's what people tell their friends, that's where truth always happens. Let's say I've had a terrible meal; as I'm leaving the maître d' asks how it was, I say, 'Fine.' But to my friends, I'll say that was a terrible meal. That's a third-party conversation."

Right now, two Besitos are in operation, both on Long Island. Following what have clearly been positive "third-party conversations," there are plans for more, perhaps as many as 50. A franchise? Tanney replies: "I don't like the idea of franchise. Let's say we're going to have a lot of Besitos. The next one will be in West Hartford, Connecticut, and after that, in Salt Lake City."

There is more to his restaurant empire: American Roadside Burgers, a spin-off of Tanney's Huntington- and Hicksville-based American Burger Company. He talks about this restaurant with justifiable pride, for at American Roadside Burgers, fast food is also quality food.

The burgers are fresh, lean, and cooked to order. All the toppings are free: lettuce, tomato, jalapeños, mushrooms, pink sauce, relish, onions—and more. There's also free WiFi, as well as plug-in stations for re-charging phones. In keeping with the theme of the restaurant—Ode to the Road—the décor features distressed leather booths, hardwood floors, original barn siding, exposed ceilings, and a lam sink. A new Yamaha Road Star motorcycle is parked in the dining area, to be given away in a drawing on May 28.

American Roadside, Tanney says, will be going public sometime this year. Anything else? "Well," he adds, "I'm always thinking—and I'm always behind what I'm thinking." ■

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