

BESITO  
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Crain's New York Business  
Bob Lape  
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## **Agave and kisses on L.I.**

*Besito serves upscale Mexican food with affection; get ready for din and gloom*

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**Cuisine:** Mexican  
**Wines:** 25 choices, eight by the glass, and 50 tequilas  
**Dress:** No code  
**Noise Level:** Wicked  
**Price Range:** \$17-\$26  
**Wine Markup:** 100%-350%  
**Credit Cards:** All major  
**Reservations:** Recommended  
**Hours:** Dinner daily, 5-11 p.m.; Brunch weekends, 1-5 p.m.

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**\*\*\*\*= Outstanding**

**\*\*\*= Excellent**

**\*\*= Very good**

**\*= Good**

It's noisy as hell and dark inside Besito, restaurateur John Tunney III's trailblazing Mexican eatery and agave lounge in Huntington. But the roomy ethnic watering hole and restaurant has method in its murky madness.

When the menu proves unreadable due to tiny print and low light levels in the dining room, a friendly waitress will offer a small squeeze-it flashlight bearing the Besito logo for you to use, telling you to take it home with you. Every squeeze then and afterward will remind you of Besito, Spanish for "little kiss."

As eyes adjust to the gloom, and ears to the merry din of the tequila-tipping set three deep at the bar, the visual and culinary merits of this Long Island hot spot become clear.

Mr. Tunney, whose great-great uncle was Jack Dempsey nemesis Gene Tunney, has punched up his atmospherics with wrought-iron lanterns, colorfully striped banquettes and a ceiling of slender eucalyptus beams.

Chef Matthew Lake provides the firepower; his work is familiar to Manhattanites from Rosa Mexicano and 27 Standard. A Rosa practice now standard in upscale Mexican restaurants is the tableside prep of guacamole in a lava stone bowl, done with precision at Besito.

Other *entradas* (\$6 to \$13) happily touching familiar flavor bases are tortilla soup with avocado and chicken, red snapper-filled tacos topped with pickled onion, corn tortillas stuffed with crabmeat, and zestily accented ceviches. A "special" enchilada of shredded duck in a rich mole redolent of nuts won universal approval.

Patrons are given a handy glossary of Mexican cooking terms, so the menu is easily parsed, with the aid of the flashlight. The word *manchamanteles*, Spanish for "table stainer," is identified as one

of the seven mole preparations of Oaxaca. It's the sauce for chef Lake's roasted wild salmon dish garnished with crisp bananas, pineapple and *pico de gallo*. The glossary also includes a heat scale for the chiles, from a low of 3 for anchos to 10 for habaneros.

Food is artfully presented at Besito, with side dishes such as the baked cheese *queso fundido*, with chorizo, onion and cilantro, served in small, square cast-iron skillets.

Some highly recommended *platos principales*, all served with rice and black beans, are boneless beef short ribs in a chile piquin salsa, a tortilla pie of shrimp and jumbo lump crab layered with spiced tomato salsa and a poblano cream sauce, and *tacos de cochinita pibil*. The latter is tender pork seasoned with achiote and cooked in a banana leaf with more of those pickled onions and sweet plantains. The succulent chunks of meat are for sandwiching in warm, house-made tortillas.

For dessert, whipped cream-crowned pumpkin flan is appealing, and a chocolate twist on *tres leches* cake tastes better than it sounds. It is vanilla sponge cake and chocolate ganache, topped with chopped peanuts, whipped cream and chocolate sauce.

Several dishes needed salt in a recent visit. Perhaps it went to the lusty margaritas. Besito claims to sell more Patrón Reposado than anyone, and even sports four of the only 44 bottles made of Gran Patrón Burdeos, a hyper-high-end agave retailing for \$500 to \$750 a bottle.

Clearly, Besito does a lot right. This prototype has been followed by another "Little Kiss" in Roslyn, and Mr. Tunney is negotiating to open more in Port Jefferson, L.I., and Park City, Utah, and at a Connecticut casino. Visions of going public are dancing in his head.

With the check comes another gift: a tiny Mexican worry doll. Put it under the pillow at night, we are told, and in the morning all your worries will be gone. So you leave Besito with a worry doll, a flashlight, pleasant memories and a desire to return.

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