

Matamoros Puebla Grocery

Mexican Hometown Cooking on Bedford Avenue

reviewed by Kris Sherer

Lately there's been a big brouhaha in the media over the emergence of "authentic" Mexican restaurants in New York City. Critics and trend touters heralded the openings of places like Maya and Mi Cocina in Manhattan, restaurants that, at prices that would make even an Aztec king raise his eyebrows, offer hope for the naïve among us who still think chimichangas and Nachos Grandes are real Mexican food. Adios, Tex-Mex!

This story is only half-true, of course. Yes, New Yorkers may have only recently gained access to Mexican haute cuisine — its *cocina alta*. But to be fair, the real deal has been available for as long as Mexicans have lived in the five boroughs. Places like Matamoros Puebla Grocery in Williamsburg, a small, family-run grocery and taqueria, have been serving unpretentious, cheap, authentic Mexican fare for years. They're too low-profile to earn an entry in Zagat's, but they have their loyalists.

Matamoros's following takes the form of a steady trickle of hipsters who stream in and out all day, most staying just long enough to down a taco or two. Steps away from the Bedford Avenue L stop, it's become a neighborhood refuelling station—a pit-stop rather than a dining destination. Brave enough to ignore the obscuring grime on the grocery's front window, customers squeeze their way through narrow aisles to the tiny, bright counter in back. Sweet-natured Mexican cooks smile approvingly when their gringo regulars order in halting Spanish. Many customers ask for their food to go. After all, who really wants to stare at a tower of Pampers and dog food cans while eating? And seating is scarce at peak times, with just three small tables and a few stools along two counters.

Corn, the original workhorse of Mexican cuisine, is the star of the show here. The all-women kitchen turns out antojitos (snacks) like tacos, tostadas, and sopes, plus more substantial fare like tamales, roast chicken, and posole. The short menu is further limited by the fact that about half the dishes can be ordered only on weekends.

Tacos (\$2.00) are Matamoros' housemade soft corn tortillas lined with any of about ten fillings. Salsa is gently administered unless otherwise ordered (specify *verde* or *roja*). Tostada con pollo (\$2.00) is a mound of shredded chicken on a single fried tortilla with sharp queso fresco crumbled on top. Though difficult to manage with either plastic silverware or fingers, tostadas are very good. Sopes (\$1.50), not to be mistaken for soup (*sopa*), are mini, non-fried tostadas that can be bunched up and eaten easily. Chopped radishes and a wedge of lime garnish the side of most paper plates at Matamoros.

A less-encountered food found at this taqueria is the *torta*. *Torta* is Spanish for cake, and the word belongs to several unrelated foods. In this case, a *torta* is a delightfully messy, traditional Mexican sandwich. In the state of Jalisco, *tortas* are open-faced, but at Matamoros Puebla Grocery, they're, well, sandwiched. Slices of a soft, flat wheat roll called *telera* are layered with the meat of your choice, lettuce, tomato, the lurking jalapeño, cilantro, and runny gobs of sour cream-based sauce. (Thankfully, there are paper napkin dispensers on each table.) *Torta de queso de porca* (\$4.50) contains a marbled ham similar in taste to prosciutto.

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A standout on the menu is posole, one of the labor-intensive dishes produced only on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. It's a soup of huge white corn kernels in a soothing, salty, cornstarch-thickened broth garnished with onions and ground bay leaf. The broth takes on a tang when lime juice is squeezed in. Recipes for posole generally call for cubed pig's head, but at Matamoros the soup is more likely to be served with shredded chicken or pork.

Another weekend-only treat, white corn tamales are made with great skill. They separate easily from their corn husk wrappers and have a perfectly moist, spongy texture. Tamales con mole are wonderfully smoky in flavor, thanks to the mole-and-pork mixture inside. A vegetable tamal with its meek vegetable filling was bland.

For dessert, there's warm arroz con leche, a tasty, heavily cinnamoned, gruel-like rice pudding. Champurrados and atole, ancient beverages unique to Mexico's history, are made from corn flour, sugar, water and milk. The thick mix is enhanced with chocolate for champurrados and with crushed fruit for atole. Atole is a classic accompaniment for tamales.

What better to drink with this type of simple, honest Mexican cooking than beer? Sadly, Matamoros is not licensed for on-premise alcohol consumption. A handwritten notice lays down the law: "No Alcoholic Beverages Allowed in This Place." How frustrating to eat within arm's reach of the grocery's verboten Coronas. As an alternative, Jarritos, the super-sweet Mexican soft drinks, are available in a rainbow of fruit flavors. Jarritos do OK with Mexican food because despite its dazzling diversity, most of its dishes lack a sweet component.

Why did the owner name his business "Matamoros Puebla Grocery?" It's akin to christening an establishment "Madison Wisconsin Coffeeshop" or "Paris France Bistro." The owner probably wanted his patrons to be clear as to *which* Matamoros is his hometown: it's not the Matamoros that is a maquiladora industrial zone staring eye-to-eye across the Rio Grande at Brownsville, Texas. His Matamoros, population 30,000, is about 100 miles south of Mexico City in the central, landlocked state of Puebla.

Matamoros Puebla Grocery
193 Bedford Avenue
between North 6th and North 7th Streets
(718) 782-5044
Open every day 10 am to 10 pm
Cash only

Kris Sherer lives in Brooklyn and writes about food, restaurants, and agriculture.