

RANCH & COAST

San Diego's Ultimate Lifestyle Magazine

To Die For



Death by Tequila

Top Chef vet applies creativity and locavore ethos at coastal Mex newcomer

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Mexican food is ubiquitous throughout San Diego County. Locals are rightly thankful for such an embarrassment of riches, but it can be challenging finding venues that go beyond taco-shop fare; those that treat south-of-the-border cuisine with the eye of a gourmand and incorporate fresh, locally-sourced ingredients. But just such a gem can be found in Encinitas, made all the more intriguing when the eatery sports the cryptic exterior signage "DxT." That acronym stands for Death by Tequila, telegraphing a list of the named spirit 100 bottles deep. That's certainly impressive, but even with that robust agave stock, this newcomer to South Coast Highway 101 (housed in the former home of Via Italia Trattoria) is a restaurant first and foremost, and a fine one at that.

Locavorianism rules the day here. Ingredients are sourced daily from nearby purveyors, including Encinitas' Aschbrenner Acres and Escondido's JR Organics, which allows chef Angel Sosa (a runner-up on season seven of Bravo's *Top Chef*) to adjust plates one day to the next and keeps DxT's offerings fresh for its growing legion of regulars.



A flatiron steak entrée features a salty, herbaceous chimichurri as well as a mélange of freshly picked, charred, and caramelized veg (trumpet mushrooms, zucchini, cherry tomatoes, and girthy scallions on a recent visit) that's as enticing as the perfectly pink protein. And while it's customary for a succulent chicken thigh to perch atop a salad of snap peas tossed in zingy, sweet-tart vinaigrette, other crisp, brilliantly green produce such as haricot verts make for lovely stand-ins should seasonality dictate a substitution.

For those seeking more traditional Mexican dishes, they are plentiful. Variations on salsa and guacamole (the latter comes in a flight that includes versions made with pumpkin seeds and poblano chiles as well as pineapple and chipotle peppers) comprise a fifth of the menu. Baja-style street tacos stuffed with carnitas, fish, or purple potatoes dressed in zesty mole sauce satisfy habitual San Diegan cravings, as do tostadas. The best of that stock reconstructs elements of Baja street corn, combining grilled kernels and corn puree with garlic aioli and crumbled, aged, mildly funky cheese.

The most outgoing and inventive section of the menu consists of a trio of raw fish preparations, all of which challenge diners' conceptions of the dishes that inspired them. An albacore aguachile with mint, serrano chile, and cured cucumbers tastes like a spicy bread-and-butter pickle, while ahi crudo is served with jicama and chile oil in a kaffir lime broth that transports one's taste buds to Thailand versus TJ. In addition to being tasty and gorgeous, both dishes are plated in a manner that makes it easy to get an ideal bite combining every ingredient (and slurping that floral crudo broth is encouraged).



Ahi Crudo, coconut kaffir lime broth, jicama, chile oil, cilantro, dill

Flan is taken to the next level at DxD care of a snowy sprinkle of finely shredded manchego cheese that adds salt and savory creaminess to what's all-too-often an end-of-meal letdown. In the mood for churros? They're here too, but piped into thin, pistachio-sugared strands ready for dipping in smoked chocolate sauce. Bonus: they're gluten-free.

DxD's cocktail list leans heavily on its collection of tequilas and mezcals. Many house drinks are agave-laced interpretations of classics such as a mojito; the "Arigato Vato" opts in Milagro silver, jalapeño, and Japanese shiso over standard mint. Even Italy's Negroni is fair game, with DxD's "El Jefe" combining sweet vermouth, orange, and smoky Gracias a Dios mezcal.

Mixed drinks plus Baja wines and beer can be enjoyed at the bar while taking in reggae and a wall-to-wall mural featuring a Margarita-toting mermaid against a beachy backdrop. DxT isn't your everyday Mexican restaurant — that's the point — but there's enough homage to keep San Diegans firmly rooted in the heritage of our much-beloved adopted regional cuisine, and enough freshness and flavor to keep them coming back for more. 760.782.2240, deathbytequila.com Brandon Hernández



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