

Besito Mexican preparing for April 8 opening for Westshore diners



Laura Reiley, Times Food Critic

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The candle wall is already flickering with 150 electric votives, but banquettes still need to be placed and the cobblestone patio is yet to be laid. The hours are ticking by as WestShore Plaza anticipates the April 8 debut of Besito Mexican. The Palm steakhouse location closed quietly last year — too many steakhouse competitors nearby? — providing the ideal space for Outback Steakhouse founder Chris Sullivan and business partner Hugh Connerty to bring something all new to Tampa's business corridor.

Sullivan became familiar with John Tunney's "polished casual" Mexican concept, which debuted in 2006 with two locations in Long Island and one in Hartford, Conn. He got involved, opening two in Boston, with another coming later this year in Philadelphia and one in Boca Raton. Tampa's location represents the first foray into Florida, says Florida partner Stanley Goodman, himself a longtime Canadian Outback operator.

"There's Mexican everywhere. But this is white tablecloth but not high end, which allows us to cater to everyone," Goodman said on a walk-through of what will be a 260-seat restaurant with two private dining rooms and a cupola-covered patio adjacent to that of Maggiano's. "We're definitely not burritos, but this is great street food that's authentic."

Connerty and Sullivan, friends for more than

30 years and partners in ConSul Hospitality Group, aim to do for Mexican food what P.F. Chang's has done for Chinese. There are already upscale Mexican chains — Cantina Laredo, Rosa Mexicana and even Taco Bell is getting in the game with a new concept called U.S. Taco Co. and Urban Taproom — but in the Tampa Bay area this newcomer represents a novel spin on a familiar cuisine.

According to Goodman, Besito (Spanish for little kiss) will offer ceviches and guacamole made tableside, the latter ground in a traditional moljacetete (volcanic stone mortar and pestle). There will be 75 sipping tequilas, rice and beans will be served family style, and dishes will be composed of carefully sourced and authentic ingredients.

"One of the great things about Florida is it has a large Latin American population," said Goodman, who has hired 110 people to staff the dining room and kitchen of Besito. "We will be using local purveyors and fish. And really, unusual Mexican items are easy to source out of Florida."

Sullivan, whose most recent concept is Carmel Kitchen (formerly Cafe), has operated under a noncompete since departing what is now Bloomin' Brands Inc.: No steakhouses to compete with Outback, no seafood to compete with Bonefish and no Italian to compete with Carrabba's. Upscale Mexican fits the bill, but it also may reflect a number of dining trends: punchy Latin American flavors; upscale settings juxtaposed with affordable prices; ambitious cocktail programs; and hand-helds and sharables that make dining more of a communal experience.

It also may neatly fill a hole in the Westshore area. Joining neighbors P.F. Chang's, Maggiano's, Mitchell's Fish Market and Seasons 52, this new 7,500-square-foot restaurant will accommodate shoppers and local business people with a cuisine that is largely represented by fast casuals like Chipotle or independents like Miguel's.

On Monday afternoon the wood floors were still papered-over and the cut-tin mariachi band sculpture was MIA. But still, this "little kiss" looks like big news for Westshore diners.

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