



November 10, 2008

# THE NEW YORKER

By Leo Carey

The term yerba buena refers to a number of different types of mint—exactly which depends on where in the Americas you are—and seems an apt name for a pan-Latin restaurant. Yerba Buena, which opened about four months ago in a slightly cursed East Village spot, unfussily pulls



together a mix of cuisines—including Mexican (tacos), Peruvian (ceviche), and Cuban (a variation on the Cuban sandwich in pizza form)—in a room in which the dark wood, potted palms, and slatted blinds give the place a certain “Our Man in Havana” feel.

The chef, Julian Medina, has a way of making individual tastes register, often by slightly undercooking vegetables, and his care for detail—the airy batter on the tilapia or the balance of flavors in the guacamole—can have a transformative effect on familiar dishes. Salt is a keynote, often thanks to the use of chicharrón (deep-fried pork rind). This is first encountered in the picadas, a paper cone full of pork scraps, chorizo, fried plantain, and miniature croquettes. But the porcine climax of the evening is the lechón, or suckling pig. The pork, succulent and pulled, has the fibrous texture of prosciutto or Peking duck. If the kitchen at Yerba Buena is a striking success, the bar is even more so. Familiar drinks, like the mojito, acquire a new botanical intensity, and the barman, Artemio Vasquez, has a number of creations that, unlike most specialty cocktails, deserve to be more widely known. The Desert Rose, made with rose-infused gin and prickly-pear juice and graced with a single floating petal, mixes dewlike purity with a twist of tartness. The Poquito Picante is a pale-green blend of gin, cilantro, and cucumber, garnished with a dried jalapeño, so that the placid initial taste contains within it a delayed crescendo of bite.

There’s a lot to be said for eating at the bar, because the bar staff’s devotion to their art manifests itself in a kind of bibulous camaraderie, as they demonstrate cocktail-shake actions to each other; taste tequilas, mescals, and Dark-and-Stormys; and sometimes offer them to anyone who shows interest. As he passed each powerful potion around on a recent evening, Vasquez invariably justified it as being “good for the throat.” Indeed, infectious conviviality suffuses the entire place. When a birthday occurs (one an hour seems to be the average), the honoree has to blow out a sparkler rather than a candle, and the entire restaurant tends to join in the singing. (Open daily for dinner; open weekends for brunch beginning Nov. 22. Entrées \$22-\$27).