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By Moira Hodgson



“The Ancient South American Secret Is Now Yours,” read the label on a mysterious package delivered to my door last week. “Drink. Think. Live. Love. Top Leaf Maté.” It was a selection of teas sent by a Chilean friend who lives in Oregon. He had added a note: “Maté is pretty good with bourbon too.”

Maté is a tea made from yerba buena, a mintlike herb believed, among other things, to boost the immune system, soothe digestion and calm nerves. I didn’t try it with bourbon (never having acquired much of a taste for that whiskey), but I discovered that it was pretty good with pisco, a grape brandy. At Yerba Buena in the East Village, it comes in a cocktail, made with Chilean pisco, lime and grapefruit cordials, called a “Boludo Yerba Maté.”

The restaurant, on a grungy stretch of Avenue A just above Houston Street, looks like a dive in Old Havana. The lofty wood-paneled bar, back-lit in turquoise and lime green, is hung with smoked-glass wrought-iron lamps and flanked by palm fronds. A blown-up photograph of a street in Cuba dominated by a 1959 Chevy BelAir hangs on the opposite wall. The sound system pumps out a mix of salsa, Latin jazz and Afro-Cuban music, but the loudest noise is the rattling of the cocktail shaker.

Behind the bar, dressed in a dark shirt and vest, Artemio Vasquez mixes the restaurant’s drinks. No girly cocktails here. He previously worked at Pegu Club and PDT and his Latin concoctions, made with fresh juices, are as much of a draw as the food. The Pisco Sour is served in a goblet, topped with beaten egg whites decorated with a swirl of angostura bitters in a lotus leaf pattern. The Yerba Buena Mojito—not too sweet—is made with mint leaves steeped in yerba buena, squeezed through a strainer into the rum over ice cubes. You can also start the evening off with a caipirinha or something more esoteric, such as a Desert Rose: rose-infused gin, prickly pear purée and lemon juice.

YERBA BUENA’S pan-Latin menu is overseen by Julian Medina, chef, owner and partner; Mr. Medina also owns Toloache, a Mexican restaurant in midtown. Partner and general manager Giovanni Campos devised the wine list, which has a wide selection of Latin, California and Spanish choices at reasonable prices. (Kudos to our charming French waiter, who when asked which of three albariños he recommended steered us to his favorite, which also happened to be the cheapest, a smoky Martin Codax from Spain at \$30.)

The small, low-lit dining room, manned by an affable staff dressed in black, seats just 50 on white leather chairs and banquettes. Plain wooden tables are set with votive candles, and through the louvered shutters at the back of the room, you can catch glimpses of the kitchen. Long, narrow mirrors are tilted along the walls, which are covered in white flock paper; the mirrors allow people facing in from the room to see the action. And there is plenty of it. Every time I came here there were birthdays, duly noted and celebrated by the staff with sparkler-topped desserts, singing and general applause. (One of my friends, carried away by it all, even inquired about renting the place for New Year’s Eve.

The menu is designed for snacking with cocktails or for a full meal. Calamari crusted with blue cornmeal, served with plantains and a tamarind vinaigrette, was a perfect match for a Pisco Sour, as were the crisp potato mushroom croquettes with truffle jalapeño sauce. The spinach and cheese empanadas turned out to be surprisingly leathery, but were somewhat redeemed by a lovely salad of ripe figs. I loved the chunky salad of jicama, avocado, orange and tomato tossed in a citrus vinaigrette, and the ceviche made with thick pieces of hamachi marinated in chilies and lime juice.

MATÉ MAKES AN appearance in the kitchen, mixed with pomegranate juice as a glaze for the beef short ribs. The ribs were one of the best dishes on the menu, rich and unctuous, served with a pile of crisp hand-cut shoestring fries and chimichurri sauce.

The pulled suckling pig was also very good, tender pieces in an orange garlic sauce with yucca purée, topped with a piece of chicharrón, the Latin version of crackling.

One evening the manager apologized; he said they were a man short and he took the drinks off the bill. Another night we were told the baked rice dishes took 30 minutes. Whatever. But those casseroles cooked in earthenware dishes were worth the wait. The fideua was a mix of prawns, cockles, calamari and chorizo in deep saffron sauce with macaroni and aioli (on another night, there was a version with coconut rice). The arroz con pollo delivered a golden piece of chicken on a pink bed of chaufa, a Latin take on Chinese fried rice, laced with scallions and piquillo peppers.

Desserts included a Latin favorite, churros, with dulce de leche and chocolate dipping sauces, and a rich coconut cake steeped in tres leches, topped with grilled pineapple salsa—very nice with a fizzy glass of moscato. Which is probably why I began writing this review with a headache. But then I made myself a cup of yerba maté. Is it wishful thinking, or do I feel better already?