

PRIMO PAN-LATIN AND HIGHLY ORIGINAL COCKTAILS  
TO COMPLIMENT CHEF MEDINA'S CUISINE

Oddly, for a city with such a large Hispanic population, there is a dearth of really good Latin restaurants. With the arrival of the vibrant and scrumptious Yerba Buena, additional Latin restaurants would seem superfluous. In a romantically lit intimate space that seats 46, Yerba Buena (which means "good herb") showcases the robust pan-Latin cookery of chef/co-owner Julian Medina, the vivacious and unusual cocktails mixed up by Artemio Vasquez and the impassioned conviviality of host/sommelier/manager/co-owner Giovanni Campos, truly the Latin edition of Le Cirque owner Sirio

Maccioni. I've encountered Campos several times before at various excellent restaurants around town, and I have described him as "the friendliest and most conscientious manager I've seen in action"; it's still true, trust me. Campos and Medina amply demonstrate how well a restaurant can be run and how good food can be when the host and chef are hands-on owners. The cozy and bricky dining room, designed by Welly Lai, is set about with cream leather banquettes and chairs, and pendant lights with blue glass shades hang from the high ceiling. Brunette wood paneling frames leafy wallpaper, and one wall features a giant photograph of a street in Cuba with a '50s Chevrolet in the foreground.

Behind the backlit green and aquamarine bar, Vasquez makes his magical drinks all from scratch, using only top-shelf liquors. Campos' wine list offers a wide array of Spanish, Latin and California bottles; the beer list includes some fine South American brews. When we ordered a Poquito Picante, Campos told us that it was the most popular drink of the 16 highly original concoctions offered. I can see why: it lets you know right away that it's definitely for grown-ups. Peppery and intense, it's a truly invigorating combination of Tanqueray gin, jalapeño, cucumber, cilantro, Cointreau and freshly squeezed lemon juice. The Azteca is milder, showing off mellow but sneaky Siembra Azul tequila that is nicely abetted by honeyed yellow Chartreuse and St. Germain elderflower liqueur. The Desert Rose features rose-infused Plymouth gin (my favorite gin) and prickly pear puree, made all puckery by lemon juice. Chef Medina, a native of Mexico City, worked with the great Richard Sandoval, one of the best Mexican chefs in the country. Sandoval tapped Medina to help him open his flagship restaurant, Maya. Today, Medina also owns Toloache, one of the best Mexican restaurants in town. His menu at Yerba Buena has plenty of Mexican touches, but it's really pan-Latin cuisine.

Fresh chunky guacamole gets a nice kick from minced chipotles and lightly crunchy texture from diced red onion. Queso fresco is crumbled on top. I've never had better guacamole. And I've never had better fish tacos. Crusted fried tilapia makes the perfect filling, and the fish gets additional crunch from chipotle and jicama cabbage slaw. The tacos alone will lure me back to Yerba Buena. Pizza Cubana displays Medina's marvelous imagination. Berkshire ham, pulled suckling pig, Swiss cheese and tart pickles on a tortilla-thin crust invoke all the direct flavors of a Cubano sandwich, but without the arduous heft.

Moqueca, or Brazilian paella, arrives bubbling hot in a glazed bowl known as a cazuela. Whole baby squid, shrimp, crawfish, octopus, clams and salt cod are stewed in coconut milk and strewn over magically green rice. Each fish and shellfish are cooked perfectly—certainly no mean feat! In fact, a more attentive kitchen would be difficult to imagine. Two amazingly tender boneless ribeye carvings are smeared with aji panka paste (a mild green Peruvian chile), and grilled to perfection. Three fried yucca balls and a cubed avocado salad complement the steak perfectly. Crispy shoestring fries—actually thinner than shoelaces—are doused with chimichurri sauce and brought in a brown paper cone. Piping hot churros come with chocolate and caramel dipping sauces. Pastel de Chocolate, a soft-centered Mexican chocolate cake, enjoys its chocolate-chip ice cream made with yerba buena leaves.

Campos proudly told us that roughly 80 percent of their customers are regulars. Well, we're joining the ranks!