

TimeOut

New York

Tuesday, November 25, 2008

YERBA BUENA



With its serious cocktails (by Dale DeGroff and Audrey Saunders, among other guest stars), sultry candlelit setting and low-volume soundtrack, the polished Yerba Buena—the new Pan-Latin project from Toloache chef Julian Medina—is a mature midtown restaurant that just happens to be downtown. Though the dining room channels the ghosts of pre-Castro Cuba—with tropical wallpaper and paintings of a bygone Havana—the menu veers far from the isle. The Mexican chef's dishes combine a wide range of Caribbean and South American flavors. Start with the fiery Peruvian-style shrimp soup with smoked chili oil, or the Cuban sandwich expressed as a delicate pizza. The thin crust comes topped with a crumble of the same suckling pig that stars in a delicious, hearty entrée with habanero salsa, cracklings and yucca puree. Medina knows his way around high-end presentation, delivering dishes that are as easy on the eyes as they are on the palate. While much of the food bears a distinctive robust-elegant imprint, desserts—including churros and the city's 10,000th molten chocolate cake—stumble toward convention. Thankfully, the rest of our expert meal insures this worthwhile newcomer against a similar fate.