

R E S T A U R A N T S

South American Palette

A Riot of Flavors and Textures
From Undeservedly Obscure Ingredients

By DAVID CORCORAN

HOBOKEN

WHEN I left Cucharamama after my second visit — under standard practice, my last — I felt a sharp pang of regret. I had dined amazingly well. But I had failed to order the fabada de horno, described so fetchingly on the menu as “a Latin cassoulet of white beans, sausages, smoked bacon and kale, slow-cooked in the wood-burning oven.” There was nothing to do but come back a third time.

Imagine my dismay, a few nights later, when the waiter gently broke the news that I hadn’t read the fine print. The fabada is served on Fridays and Saturdays only. I was 24 hours early. I could either camp out, alongside the whimsical cast-iron turtle that guards the restaurant’s

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front stoop, or I could order the only other main dish on the weeknight menu that I hadn’t already tried: saice (pronounced sah-EE-say), spicy braised beef and potatoes in the style of Bolivia. Oh, all right, I replied sullenly. The saice, please.

It was not the best dish of my three visits. Not even close. The chunks of beef were just a shade dry and tough; they would prove to be better as leftovers, reheated a day or two later. But oh, the flavors! First, the forward, mouth-filling taste of cumin, followed by the insistent heat of chilies, modulated by the dark tang of good vinegar; weaving through those tastes, the sweetness of tomatoes and the salt of black olives; and on top of everything, a sprig of an innocent-looking herb that sent a sudden, outsized gust of fragrance through my nasal passages.

“Quilquiña,” Maricel Presilla explained later, pronouncing it kil-KEEN-ya and patiently spelling it out. Ms. Presilla is the chef, founder, co-owner and guiding spirit of this brilliant five-month-old South Ameri-



Jim Cummins for The New York Times

can restaurant, and quilquiña is just one of dozens of undeservedly obscure ingredients that inspire her cooking and power her menu.

She is far from typical, as a chef or in any other way. She fled Cuba as a teenager with her family in 1970, taught elementary school in Miami, and eventually took a doctorate in medieval Spanish literature. She has

written children’s books and cookbooks. In 2000 she opened Zafra, a casual, luncheonette-like restaurant on Willow Avenue, just a block away, and continues to preside there as well. She is physically small but a towering presence, impressively articulate in English as well as Spanish. And while she is a scholar, she is also a creative force — gifted, instinctive and relentless in the pursuit of ingredients.

So to make her picante de camarones — a shrimp stew in pepper sauce — she not only uses juicy, intensely flavored jumbo shrimps, the Peruvian pepper called ají panca and sweet, mealy potatoes. She thickens the mixture with a silken queso blanco, or white cheese, that turns out to be low-salt French feta bought from a Turkish supplier in Union City. The resulting dish demands your full concentration, to sort out the complex, contrasting and ultimately complementary flavors and textures.

It may have been the best dish I tried at Cucharamama. But that would be a very close call. Among appetizers, for instance, there was the Colombian tamal de pipián, made with aged cornmeal, cooked in a plantain leaf and topped with a rich and potent hash of potatoes, peanuts and many supporting ingredients. There was an anticucho, or kebab, of marinated shrimps with corn relish. There were dazzling little empanadas filled with onion confit and Spanish blue cheese. There were even eight-inch thin-crust pizzas — Argen-

tina has a large Italian presence, Ms. Presilla says — that could put much of the Hoboken competition to shame.

Among main courses, there were two kinds of fish, cooked in a tall wood-burning oven that dominates the front of the room. Organic non-farm salmon came with sweet, dark roasted potatoes and a lustrous cilantro pesto; red snapper, butterflied and boned but otherwise left whole (with a pair of fava beans for eyes), came with a lively coating of

mirasol pepper and a haystack of salty sautéed kale.

Although roast suckling pig requires more foresight than we had — it is served only on Fridays and Saturdays, and you need to call five days ahead — roasted leg of pork was a worthy substitute, with rich, tender, deeply flavored meat and crackling bronzed skin. The vivid flavor of roasted free-range chicken was enhanced by a bitter-orange and garlic sauce called mojo. And beef short ribs simply melted away from their bones, into a sauce of red wine, brown sugar and mustard and a perfectly chosen accompaniment of quinoa and Swiss chard.

Desserts were as ingeniously conceived and carefully prepared as the other courses, especially a dense chocolate bread pudding and a vanilla flan scented with carob and the Peruvian grape brandy called pisco.

Cucharamama is an Andean term that translates literally as Mother Spoon, as in Mother Earth or Mother Nature: the woman whose kitchen and hearth unite the family (and by extension the village, and the whole society). In the present case, of course, that would be Maricel Presilla. Her new restaurant does not quite attain our highest rating. It is distractingly noisy, the service is unpolished, and the wait between courses can be annoying. But for anyone who cares about food, and the astounding ways its ingredients can be made to work together and lift one another to improbable heights, Cucharamama is a necessary destination, up there with the best this state has to offer.

Cucharamama

233 Clinton Street, Hoboken;
(201) 420-1700

EXCELLENT

ATMOSPHERE Tasteful and urbane, with a wood-burning oven, a magnificent curved bar and vibrant, soulful paintings by Ismael Espinosa-Ferrer, the chef’s father. Tends to be noisy.

SERVICE Earnest but a bit tentative. Waits between courses can be long.

SMOKING Not allowed.

WINE LIST Beautifully balanced and organized, with many unusual choices from South America and Spain, plenty of bottles in the \$20’s and \$30’s, and a fine selection by the glass. And don’t forget the Latin cocktails (\$8 to \$10).

RECOMMENDED DISHES Ocopa de Maní (potatoes in cream sauce), causa Limaña (potato purée with braised chicken), calamari, salt-cod-and-potato fritters, anticucho (kebab) of shrimp, empanadas, pizzas, tamales; fish of the day, roasted half chicken, canelones (cannelloni), saice (braised beef),

short ribs, roasted pork, Argentinean rib-eye steak, picante de camarones (shrimp in a spicy stew); all desserts.

PRICE RANGE Appetizers and other first courses: \$5 to \$14; entrees: \$12 to \$25; desserts: \$8 to \$10.

HOURS Closed Monday. Tuesday through Thursday, 5 to 11 p.m.; Friday through Sunday, 5 p.m. to midnight.

CREDIT CARDS American Express, MasterCard, Visa.

RESERVATIONS Recommended.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS Not accessible: two steps up from the street, two more to the restrooms.

IF YOU GO The restaurant is at the corner of Clinton and Third Streets in downtown Hoboken, opposite St. Mary Hospital (and a parking garage).

RATINGS Poor, Fair, Satisfactory, Good, Very Good, Excellent, Extraordinary. Ratings reflect the reviewer’s reaction to food, ambience and service, with price taken into consideration. Menu listings and prices are subject to change.