

Sinatra's Hometown Has a New Latin Flavor

By R. W. APPLE Jr.

HOBOKEN, N.J.

FOR many generations, the women in Maricel Presilla's family taught school. She herself is a scholar with a Ph.D. in medieval Spanish history who once taught at Rutgers. So it is no surprise that the dishes she serves at her two restaurants here are based on decades of delving into Latin American culinary anthropology, or that she can cogently explain her food to those who come underinformed to her tables.

"You have to understand the role of mixtamalization," she told me one lunchtime at Zafra, the less

formal of her places, when I asked what set Mexican tamales apart from those of Cuba, where she grew up. "The Mexicans take off the tough outer skin of the corn kernels by soaking them in lime water before grinding them into flour. That gives their tamales an earthy taste. We don't mixtamalize. So our tamales, made with fresh corn, have a much sweeter flavor."

I had just begun to grasp that polysyllabic proposition when my tamales arrived, and I dived in. But Ms. Presilla had other ideas. A tamal, she explained, is always eaten with something, never alone. She ducked into the kitchen and returned with a long plate holding a steaming tamal, some fresh salsa, a mound of slightly crunchy rice, a portion of picadillo (a beef hash) and a pot of black beans seasoned with cayenne, onions, oregano, cumin, vinegar and mild cachucha peppers.

"Every mouthful should have a little bit of everything in it," she said. "That's the Cuban way. Mix it up. Each food acts as a flavoring agent for the others."

None of this information is conveyed in a didactic tone. Small and round-faced, with large, widely set brown eyes, the 50-year-old Ms. Presilla is far too exuberant for that. She sparkles just as much as Zafra's lemon-yellow walls and the pictures on them, which were painted by her father, Ismael Espinosa.

Although the core of its menu is Cuban, Zafra also

Maricel Presilla's Cuban roots flourish in Hoboken.

serves dishes from Argentina, Mexico (including two kinds of Mexican tamales), Spain, Ecuador, Chile, Guatemala and Brazil. The fare is equally pan-Latin at its brand-new sibling, Cucharamama, a white-tablecloth establishment built around a wood-burning adobe oven that yields Peruvian-style quails and spectacular empanadas of hand-cut beef studded with olives and raisins. Suckling pigs, too, on weekends.

The food is remarkable and remarkably authentic. Eating it is a vacation. In dishes so full of the essence of Latin America that you feel as if you've flown south, every flavor is bracingly pure and unsullied. Maria Dominguez, a Cuban-American friend who swears tamales are in her bloodstream, likes Zafra's version so much that she recently took several to the Cuban writer Guillermo Cabrera Infante and his wife in London.

I will wager that you will never taste a better citrus drink than the incredibly refreshing limeade Ms. Presilla makes with juice, zest and ice, spun in a blender and served in a tall glass. She learned it from a woman in Ecuador, and if my doctor ever forces me to give up alcohol, I could get by on it. Nor will you believe that the



Phil Mansfield for The New York Times

HOBOKEN'S NEW STARS A tamale dish, to be eaten Cuban style, and a papaya shake at Zafra.

Continued on Page 5