



## First Look: Ruta Del Vino Journeys Through Latin American Cuisines

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What's a glass of wine without a journey? Justin Logan, co-owner of Petworth's Ruta del Vino (800 Upshur St. NW), which opened in November, aims to whisk diners along a snaking trail of Latin American spirits—a wine route, if you will—pairing wines from Chile and Argentina with cuisine from Mexico and Peru. DCist had the opportunity to sample some of the new restaurant's dishes and drinks.

Logan, the former director of foreign policy studies at Cato Institute, didn't want to limit the wine bar's offerings to just one country for his first dive into the D.C. restaurant scene—a project he undertook with his wife, Jessica, and investor Michelle Rodriguez. Instead, Ruta's menu draws on a bold spectrum of flavors from all over the map.

“To some, Latin American is monolithic, but there are 20 different cuisines in Mexico alone,” Logan says. “We wanted the ability to bounce around and leave room to experiment.”

The formula works. Ruta del Vino reflects the neighborhood's relaxed feel amidst a classy warmth of exposed brick, wooden wall fixtures, and glossy black tin ceiling—no hints of the former Riyadh Market, a convenience store shuttered for selling synthetic drugs. The bar itself is the space's main focal point: a sprawling, Spanish-tiled centerpiece with room for seating on all four sides, offset by cozy tables for two.

The bar's 18 Latin American wines are available by the glass or bottle (the most expensive bottle runs \$44). A pricier reserve list is in the works for those on dates who “want to peacock and blow it all out,” Logan says.

Logan is behind the counter most nights, fielding hot plates and shaking cocktails. During the daily happy hour, available for those who snag seats at the bar, the fare includes \$4 glasses of wine and winners like \$2 fish tacos with chipotle cream and thick masa fries.

Executive chef Victor Meneses, a former sous chef at Iron Gate Restaurant and executive sous chef at Notti Bianche, puts his spin on authentic Latin classics inspired by his home country of Mexico and the dishes he grew up eating as a child.

Many plates may be familiar to Latin American diners, but paired with a sauce or spice in experimental ways; it's "as if our Latin mother went to culinary school," Meneses says

A vegetarian take on chile relleno made with roasted poblano pepper, Oaxaca cheese, and heavy hints of cumin and salsa roja, echoes his mother's recipe with ground beef. The range of spices—Mexican chiles, Peruvian ajis—pack some heat. Cobia ceviche (\$9) trades its traditional citrus base for a tomato kick of salsa macha, or "brave man" sauce, as Meneses calls it.

For an appetizer, the steamed clams (\$12) hit the mark: tender pockets of meat to tear right from the shell with house-smoked pork belly and corn. They swim in a rich aji amarillo broth made from white wine, citrus and shallots, perfect for soaking a side of grilled bread.

In main dishes, the Pollo a la Huancaína (\$21) pairs crispy roasted chicken with grilled potatoes and creamy aji. There's a little more heat than the Peruvian version, but the chicken's juices mellow out the sauce. Logan's pick is the Parrillada Mixta (\$45 for two): a "meat orgy" of chicken confit, housemade chorizo, smoked sausage, and chile-rubbed hanger steak. It's served with roasted garlic vinaigrette, a spicy Chilean aji, and chimichurri, the Argentinian sauce reminiscent of pesto with garlic, parsley, and oregano.

For those who don't want wine (even at a wine bar), the cocktail list doesn't disappoint. The Sotol Fashioned (\$13), made with an agave spirit similar to tequila, puts a Mexican twist on the old fashioned. El Ritual (\$9) echoes the way Venezuelans drink solera rum: with a lime dipped in instant coffee and the crunch of raw demerara sugar for a medley of bitter, sweet, and sour.

Ruta del Vino is the latest to join the ranks of Upshur Street's exploding restaurant scene. [Timber Pizza](#), [Hank's Cocktail Bar](#) (formerly Twisted Horn), [Himitsu](#), and [Slim's Diner](#) all opened in a two-block radius this year. The wine bar has plans to add sidewalk seating in the spring, and a late-night happy hour is in the works.

Logan says that success was often hard to measure in his previous think tank profession, but to have people walk out satisfied by their meal or alight with the warmth of good wine is a whole different ballgame.

"Hopefully, we will not be just a feather in the wind," he says.