

The Washington Post

At Ruta del Vino, refreshing takes on Latin food — with nary a small plate in sight

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April 5, 2017

Neighborhood restaurants — places we frequent because everybody knows our name or the price is right (or both) — come in all shapes and sizes. The one that fits me best these days is Ruta del Vino, Spanish for “wine trail,” in Petworth. Launched in November, it serves Latin American food and drink in a rustic dining room that bucks a few annoying trends and embraces diversity.

To wit, the owners don’t do small plates. Dishes here are apportioned as appetizers and entrees, an idea more restaurants should return to. Enough already with four people splitting three deviled eggs! The menu also straddles the divide between those who live to eat and those who just want a simple steak. (Or not. A handful of meatless items await, including a roasted poblano that sends forth molten Oaxaca cheese when sliced.) No, Ruta del Vino doesn’t take reservations for fewer than seven diners, but the restaurant, which counts an overflow room, is seldom at a loss for space.

The steamed clams may change that. So much more than clams made tender by a broth of white wine, the appetizer threatens my assessment of the restaurant’s portions, lavished as the bowl is with a goody bag of soft potato, smoky pork belly and grilled corn. When each shell contains a sample of the lot, arranged in a broth made sunny with the Peruvian pepper aji amarillo, each bite takes on the heft of a clam bake.

There are other tricks up the kitchen’s sleeve. The most interesting salad used to be black kale and watercress tossed with croutons shaped from masa, shredded white cheese and pumpkin seeds. The debut of a salad incorporating cactus paddle makes me wonder why we don’t see the Mexican staple on more menus. It offers a pleasing texture, soft yet crisp, and a flavor reminiscent of okra or green beans. In combination with pickled tomatillo, shaved cabbage, jalapeño and sherry vinaigrette, the cactus takes your tongue on a roller-coaster ride. Brazil is summoned with little slabs of skewered cheese, queijo caolho, warmed on the grill. The kitchen seasons its version, based on halloumi, the Middle Eastern cheese with a high melting point, with fresh oregano and garlic oil.

So far, so fun. Let me pull out my sad trombone and tell you about the ceviches, all based on fluke and soupier than expected. No matter the preparation, the sauce takes the fish hostage by overwhelming it with lime or heat, sometimes both. Forget forks. My last bowl of ceviche found a half cup of fire water in the bowl.

Fried fish is a different animal. Try crisp mahi-mahi, tucked into a house-made corn tortilla with shaved cabbage, salsa fresco and some liquid smoke in the form of chipotle crema. Close your eyes and you could be in San Diego.

The tall dude behind the bar, the source of wine from Argentina and Chile as well as Brazil and Uruguay? That's Justin Logan, one of three co-owners and just as likely to be ferrying food as whipping up a foam-topped pisco sour that would taste at home in Lima. The former director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, he's a laid-back presence in his debut restaurant. The young staff follows his lead, at least usually. When I inquired about the daily ceviche not long ago, a server shook his head and warned, "Too many ingredients."

New Mexico native Victor Meneses, 32, leads the kitchen. A former sous-chef at Iron Gate in Dupont Circle, he seems to know what the masses are hungry for, delivering grilled hanger steak, pulsing with lime and garlic, and juicy roast chicken, swollen with some of the same flavors. Every bit as compelling as the stars of the plates are their supports: thick yucca fries with the beef, grill-marked potato slices with the bird. The chicken also comes with the spicy yellow cheese sauce, huancaína, popular in Peru and one of those accents that encourages recipients to use their fingers as swipes.

The most eye-popping visual is a board of mixed meats: zesty house-made chorizo, smoked sausage, chicken confit and rosy slices of that hanger steak, flanked by a trio of sauces, including roasted garlic, that aren't necessary but enhance whatever they touch. But the sausage fest (\$45 for two, \$90 for four) is less for the dry Spanish rice and timid black beans that accompany the assembly. If it's sausage you want, consider choripan, the street food of choice in Argentina and offered here as a racy link inside a split bun. Served as an appetizer on its home turf, the sandwich shows up alongside a bushel of fries. Thin and hot, the papas fritas are of the frozen variety, but their ground chile pepper seasoning is made by the chef.

Glitches here and there keep my affection in check. The empanada tasted breadier on a later visit than when I first sank my teeth into the baked pastry, and in the sea of whole grilled fish out there, Ruta del Vino's red snapper is unevenly cooked and riddled with so many tiny bones, dinner turns into microsurgery. Still, little moments — fabulous condiments, a tart margarita, a helpful wine tip — sustain my interest in the corner restaurant. (If you're looking for something to wash back meat here, Logan suggests the Casas del Bosque Gran Reserva cabernet sauvignon from Chile for \$44.)

Something sweet? Ruta del Vino's nut-sprinkled chocolate tart sports the texture, if not the full-on decadence, of fudge. I like it. But the crowd-pleaser is an order of warm, sugar-sprinkled churros, almost as long as rulers and graced with ripples of the kind you see in sand deserts. Then again, sweetened fried dough, dipped in a pot of chocolate, is hard to resist pretty much anywhere.

The interior is a bit like the food, creative enough to become the response to "What's for dinner?" when there are nearby pizza joints, watering holes and diners calling. Planters filled with pothos, or devil's ivy, dress the top half of a front wall, and a stack of wood near the bar has diners looking for a fireplace (the oak is used to fuel the kitchen's grill). Should you come with a stroller or desire some privacy, there's a backroom whose banana leaf wallpaper introduces you

to a relatively quiet jungle. The heart of the restaurant is the bar in the center of the room, my favorite place to land if there's just me or we're two.

The arrival of the Japanese-inspired Himitsu, the pie-centric Timber Pizza Company and now Ruta del Vino have made Petworth a more tempting place to live and visit. This much is true of all three: Familiarity breeds contentment.