

Peruvian Panache

Mochica's Upscale Home Cooking

BY MARIA PICCININNI

IMAGINE YOU ARE invited to a casual dinner party by a lovely and hospitable host – in Peru. The conversation sparkles and the wine flows. That is the feel of Mochica (937 Harrison), a cozy yet upscale Peruvian-Latin restaurant in colorful South of Market. Chef/Owner Carlos Altamirano wanted to bring the warmth and heartiness of Peruvian cuisine to a chic city crowd, and he does exactly that. As a child, his mother lovingly taught him a passion for cooking and when he arrived in the States, he knew he wanted to share the tastes and experiences of his native cuisine in his own restaurant. While waiting for just the right spot to open up, he blazed his way through some of San Francisco's finest culinary jewels, including LuLu, Rose Pistola, Grand Café, Hawthorne Lane, and Postrio.

Nestled right off the freeway ramp, Mochica is a lovely hideaway. Don't let the industrial feel of the street scare you away. Low lighting and rich rust-colored walls evoke a feeling of someone's comfortable yet fashionable dining room. Ornate golden frames of abstract art playfully line the walls, and you are even greeted in the entry hall by a charming console and large mirror. The uncluttered, minimalist setting is warmed with light fixtures, lanterns, and pottery. The wait staff is friendly and attentive and will happily explain any of the dishes to a Peruvian cuisine newbie.

Altamirano's menu offers Peruvian staples of fresh seafood, meat, and potatoes – lots of them. Potatoes are included in almost every dish and are prepared in many different ways. Altamirano is so dedicated to true native cuisine that his brother even

makes trips to the States to deliver herbs and spices that cannot be found here. Some ingredients are so authentic, there is not even an English equivalent to describe them.

Weekends at Mochica are busy and attract about a 70 percent native S.F./American crowd and a 40 percent Peruvian audience, according to Altamirano. The chef's goal is to share his country's culinary delights with guests so they walk away with a warm appreciation towards rustic, Peruvian home cooking. Nothing too unusual, yet he offers some creative dishes that other local Peruvian restaurants do not, such as Tequenos – shrimp and mozzarella stuffed wontons with orange soy sauce and avocado puree (\$8) – and Pulpo a la Oliva – braised octopus in white wine and fish broth, tossed with olives, mayo, and salsa criolla (\$9).

Instead of pre-dinner bread, Mochica serves deep-fried Peruvian garbanzos mixed with chopped onions, tomatoes, parsley, Parmesan cheese and cancha (dried corn). Lightly floured, these tasty morsels provide a wonderful entry into the unique combination of flavors that await you.

For a starter, we tried the Peruvian Corn and Beet Salad (\$7) with queso fresco, tomato and cilantro dressing. Refreshing yet hearty, fresh beets mix nicely with potatoes (naturally), sweet corn and nutty ricotta-like queso fresco cubes, while the tangy dressing gives it additional zing. Green and yellow dollops of dressing adorn the plate. Another standout of Altamirano's cuisine is his presentation – alternating swirls of colors and strategically placed food and garnishes transform these “made with love” dishes into artistic masterpieces.

NEXT PAGE →



Chef/Owner Carlos Altamirano

← PREVIOUS PAGE

One aspect not to be overlooked in any dish is the Peruvian corn. Each oversized kernel easily takes about two bites to get through. The corn is slightly sweet and hearty, but not overpowering, melding quite nicely with the tastes of paired ingredients. Paul, my brave dining partner, had visions of giant-sized corn stalks being the only things capable of yielding such a treat.

We tried several appetizers. Beef Anticuchos (\$9) are skewers of thinly pounded lean beef that melts in your mouth. These are served with Yukon gold potatoes and ocopa, a green sauce blended with fresh cheese, milk, crackers, cilantro and another herb that escapes any English equivalent. In addition to beef, you can choose skewers with beef heart (if you are so bold), chicken or fish. Chicharrones (\$9) were very simple, lightly battered chicken (or calamari) chunks marinated in aji limo, soy sauce and garlic. This delicately pungent delight is served with salsa criolla – diced tomatoes, onions, cilantro, lemon, salt, oil, and aji panca – and dry red chiles. Choros a la Chalaca (\$8) are huge New Zealand mussels topped with tomatoes, onions, Peruvian corn and marinated in limejuice, cilantro, and rocoto. These hearty guys are so large, you get a taste of all accompanying ingredients in each and every shell. Delicious if you are fond of mussels.

If you are a ceviche lover, Mochica offers five varying styles. Altamirano says these dishes are always a big hit. Served with everything from yam to giant corn, shrimp to halibut, there is surely a combination to please your palette.

Next, we entered the realm of Peruvian Specialties – as if we hadn't already tasted some native delights. Dishes range from \$14 to \$17 and cover an array of items, such as halibut, chorizo, calamari, lamb, chicken, salmon, pork, steak, and even vegetarian risotto. We tried the Lenguado Escabachado, pan-seared halibut served

with escabeche (sautéed onion and vinegar), beets, boiled potatoes, and egg. This smooth fish was moist and dissolved on the tongue delicately without being too heavy. My pick for favorite by far. Pepian de Pollo is a sautéed chicken breast, smothered in tomatoes and a chickpea puree, combined with red pepper compote and rocoto aioli. This lovely mixture tasted like a spicy version of hummus. Thankfully, the sauce helped balance the somewhat dry and tough chicken.

Plan your meal carefully, as you will thank me when you still have room for dessert. Goodies are all priced at \$6 and include lemon pie, rice pudding, passion fruit mousse, and strawberry cheesecake. We opted for the Flan de Coco – a coconut flan with strawberry marmalade. Yellow mango sauce swirls playfully around the plate alongside a deep red berry sauce. This combo is more than just pretty, it's divine. I would recommend the Banana Flambé as well. The banana is coated in pisco, a Peruvian liquor, and what seems to be a cinnamon sugar. Lucuma ice cream contrasts the warm banana with a lovely cold citrus burst. Lucuma is a tropical fruit native to Peru.

Mochica serves up artfully presented rustic Peruvian dishes in a comfortably chic atmosphere. If you are looking for unique spices and fashionable preparations for basic beef, chicken, and fish, this is for you. This place is perfect for a casually upscale night out or a unique dinner party for ten. Even the neighboring leather-clad locals from the SoMa scene blend nicely with the artful Peruvian home feel. While it might be off the beaten dining path, this gem is worth the excursion.

Mochica is located at 937 Harrison (at Fifth St.) and is open 11:30am–3:30 pm for lunch Wednesday through Monday, 5:30pm–10:00pm for dinner Wednesday through Monday, closed Tuesdays. To make a reservation, call 278-0480. ■

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