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Entertainment & the Arts: Friday, February 10, 2006

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Restaurant Review

In love with Mixtura's colorful "novo-Andean" cuisine

By Nancy Leson

Seattle Times restaurant critic

Valentine's Day is next week, and I'd like to celebrate by telling you that I've fallen deeply and passionately in love.

I'm gripped by the kind of longing that makes my cheeks flush, my knees weak and has me on the phone with friends describing every hot little detail of my new romance — with Mixtura, the new Peruvian restaurant in Kirkland.

Mixtura is as exotic as it is familiar, its structural bones recognizable from its earlier incarnations, most recently as Jeger. Seated in a soft, supple banquette I gave the place the slow once-over, absorbing its small curved bar, its stylish simplicity, its well-schooled waiters serving up frothy pisco sours along with astute recommendations and snappy repartee. Suddenly, everything old looked new again.

One of 10 counter seats fronting the kitchen is the perfect perch for watching chef Emmanuel Piqueras and crew as they create a magical mosaic of modern Peruvian cuisine. Piqueras, late of Lima and, more recently, Andina restaurant in Portland, offers a Technicolor adventure in derring-do that melds indigenous ingredients with artful technique, bringing us a taste of what's currently captivating cosmopolitan Peruvians.

And though my new love is purely for Mixtura, my heart goes out to Piqueras for bringing such a ray of culinary sunshine to our oft-gray corner of the world.

As he did at Andina, Piqueras is offering his take on "novo-Andean" cuisine, inspired by fresh seafood and a cornucopia of produce including choclo, yucca, lucuma, passion fruit and ajies — the colorful chile peppers essential to the cuisine.

His menu is composed, in large part, by a long list of "mixturas" — two dozen little dishes, many also offered as a tapa suitable for one or two. Making a meal of these is acceptable and advisable. As long as you realize that by doing so you'll miss out on some knocked-out-gorgeous and utterly delicious "fondos" (entrees).

So where do you start? Your server will take that difficult decision out of your hands, arriving with a basket of delicious quinoa rolls, best when hot from the oven. Made with the staple-grain of the ancient Incas, these are accompanied by a trio of dips that introduce the assertive flavors yet to come. Order a sampling of Old World olive oils (\$8) and you'll get another basket. You may also get Piqueras as side-dish.

"This one is Greek, this is Italian and this, my favorite, is Spanish," explains the young Peruvian, brandishing his bottled oils and considerable charm tableside. As you dip bread into cunningly off-kilter bowls filled with the oil, fresh chives and sublime smoked sea salt, he'll tell

PREV 1 of 2 NEXT



enlarge KEN LAMBERT / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Stylish new Peruvian restaurant in Kirkland captures our critic's heart with its technicolor take on "Novo-Andean" cuisine.

Mixtura

148 Lake St. S., Kirkland, 425-803-3310,

www.mixtura.biz

Latin American

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Reservations: recommended.

Hours: Dinner 5:30-9:30 p.m. Sundays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays; 5:30-10:30 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays; bar open: 4-10:30 p.m. (tapas available).

Prices: Appetizers/tapas \$4-\$16, entrees \$17-\$32, desserts \$5-\$9.

Drinks: South American cocktails (pisco sour, caipirinha, mojito) and fresh fruit blends are a specialty. A limited wine list highlights Latin labels, with more than a dozen by-the-glass options.

Parking: too few spaces in private lot.

Sound: High ceilings and a crowd can create a noisy dining room.

Who should go: Latin-food lovers looking for a blast of culinary sunshine. Those in need of a vacation from modern-American bistro fare.

Full bar / credit cards: AE, DISC, MC, V / no obstacles to access.

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you the story of his life (you didn't ask, but so what, it's a great story). Both condiments and chef add another dramatic dimension to this all-too-enjoyable experiment.

Experiment with Mixtura's ceviches — pristine seafood barely "cooked" with citrus fruit — and you will learn why Peru's national dish is the house specialty. El Ceviche Mixtura (\$12) mixes shellfish with finfish and finely sliced red onion. It's the best ceviche I've ever tasted: Flavors so fresh and clear, you'll want to try them all (there are three).

Another version appealed to the sashimi-slave in me. Envision a sushi roll unfurled, sans the rice, and you have Tiradito Marino en Mosaico: slices of marinated ono (or other Hawaiian fish), octopus and shrimp, individually layered over cucumber anchored to the plate with a searing sauce.

Mixtura's mixturas bring out the superlatives. Part of the fun is picking favorites. Mine include a marvelous mash of purple potatoes sandwiching Dungeness crab and shrimp, topped with avocado and smoked salmon. And mussels steamed, chilled and dressed with rocoto — a fiesta of tomato, onion, chiles and corn. And cheese-stuffed Raices del Ande: a cylinder of yucca and a ball of Yukon Gold potatoes, each boiled, pureed, mixed with chiles and fried.

And then there were the simplest of enticements: bite-size bits of grilled octopus; char-grilled asparagus, hearts of palm and piquillo peppers; and rosy ribbons of succulent Serrano ham.

Disappointments were few, extending only to that Peruvian favorite anticucho corazon — an overcooked skewer of beef heart — and to a "neo-classical interpretation of the traditional Spanish ham sandwich": baked phyllo squares, mesclun greens and flavorless slices of roasted pork.

But, oh, those fabulous fondos!

Maybe it takes a Peruvian chef to make lima beans irresistible. These anchor a modern version of Tacu-Tacu (\$25) — a traditional African rice-and-bean dish that, re-envisioned, resembles an artfully deconstructed paella. The cakes escort a small squid's body stuffed with scallops and shrimp, garnished with a gargantuan scampo.

Lamb shank (\$22) is an ooh-ahh hunk of meat glazed to the highest degree, its flavors reduced to an intensity that goes right to the bone. On the bone or off, Mixtura's duck (\$29) delights with three preparations in one peerless package: confit (the tender leg and thigh coated with crunchy rice flakes), magret breast (grilled to pink perfection) and foie gras (a silky slab of pan-seared liver).

Taking artistic license — and getting away with it — is what makes this kitchen so great. Serrano-wrapped sea scallops with "mango ravioli" on a plate painted with squid ink (\$26). Moist grilled marlin oiled with aji amarillo, paired with yucca gnocchi. Lasagna as dessert, stunningly composed of gossamer slices of caramelized pineapple and guanabana mousse, a nest of hand-spun sugar laced over top. Unconventional, improvisational, irresistible.

Be still, my beating heart.

Nancy Leson: 206-464-8838. More reviews at www.seattletimes.com/restaurants

SAMPLE MENU

El Cebiche Mixtura \$12

Potato torta \$4.50/\$8

Escabeche Vegetariano \$4.50/\$8

Duck Three Ways \$29

Grilled Marlin \$26

Pastel de Chocolate \$9

Pisco Sour \$9

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