

Weather: Sunny and warm, 87/67

SPORTS ★ FINAL

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Crema's refined Mexican ranges from hot to haute!



STEVEN SUNSHINE



Crema

111 W. 17th; (212) 691-4477;
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MUST HAVES:

Starter: Tamales
Oaxaquenos, \$11
Entree: Spare ribs, \$22
Dessert: Fruit soup, \$10

BY PASCALE LE DRAOULEC

When describing huitlacoche — a corn fungus considered a delicacy by many — the server at Crema called it “a Mexican truffle.”

Such license is easy to forgive at Crema, where chef Julieta Ballesteros (formerly of the wildly popular Mexicana Mama) is now turning out finespun food she calls “cocina Mexicana refinada” — refined Mexican cooking.

Crema's menu is more ambitious than Mama's — and the cheery room, where bold modern paintings cover the walls, makes you want to celebrate.

The margarita imperial (\$12) — made from lime juice, tamarind or passionfruit — is a good way to start.

For a light appetizer, try the mini corn tostadas (\$12) topped with sautéed scallops, avocado, chipotle aioli and cooling mango salsa.

The aforementioned huitlacoche comes in a soup (\$7), and its smoky flavor is balanced by cream and an intense corn sweetness. The Oaxacan tamales (\$11) rank among the best I've had in the city. Ballesteros gussies up her moist, masa dough slippers with herbs and chilies, fills them with chunks of slow-roasted pork slathered in a dark, roasted chili emulsion and bakes them in a banana leaf jacket for a pleasing grassy flavor.

Don't miss the spare ribs (\$22) broiled in an unusual sweet and sour salsa made with chili ancho, dark, unrefined Mexican sugar and guajillo pepper. The meat is fork tender and the sauce deftly pits heat against sweet. Ballesteros' signature dish, a Chilean sea bass (\$25) rubbed and crusted in achiote paste, did not thrill. Desserts, however, did not disappoint. And I recommend the refreshing fruit soup (\$10) heavily spiked with tequila for a clean, bracing finish.

food
review