

# The New Yorker August, 2006

## Tables for Two

by Leo Carey August 21, 2006

**Crema 111 W. 17th St. (212-691-4477);  
Mexican Restaurants;  
Ballesteros, Julieta;  
Mexicana Mama;  
Chelsea;  
Mexican Truffle;  
Chocolate Cake**

## CREMA



**111 W. 17th St. (212-691-4477)—Julieta Ballesteros made her name as the chef at Mexicana Mama, a tiny restaurant in the Village whose homey atmosphere belied the sophistication of the cooking. Her new spot, in Chelsea, is swankier, with adobelike walls painted a livid orange, and a bar and lounge in front where guests can sip expensive cocktails or tequilas. Banquettes thread up one side of the narrow room, facing an open kitchen, where Ballesteros, a diminutive figure of nunlike severity, marshals her small kitchen staff. Perhaps on a dare, two tables have been squeezed into a back garden the size of a fire escape.**

□ **Ballesteros promises to deliver refined Mexican cuisine, which essentially means nicely executed, fairly familiar dishes; Mexican cooking, although regionally diverse, centers on a few staple processes. The menu's corn-tortilla dishes are uniformly excellent—including long crispy flautas with shredded chicken and mini tostadas bearing sautéed scallops topped with a gorgeously balanced mix of aioli and mango salsa—although the chips that accompany an order of salsa or guacamole are oddly insipid. A few ingredients still unfamiliar to most Americans pop up on the menu, such as huitlacoche, a fungus that infects maize and is considered a delicacy in Mexico. Restaurateurs, trying to get wary diners to eat the stuff, have taken to calling it Mexican truffle, but, served here in a thick soup topped with Cotija cheese, it proves to have a sweeter, less intense taste. The wisdom of sticking to traditional formats seems borne out by some of the more innovative creations. Chicken with squash-blossom purée, portobello mushroom, and goat cheese sounded enticing but was basically a piece of breast meat overwhelmed by a large puddle of what seemed to be squash soup. Dessert draws inspiration from the flavor of mole sauce, giving a dramatic twist to that ubiquitous restaurant offering the warm chocolate cake. Each bite should be savored: precisely twenty seconds after hitting the tongue, the rich chocolate taste gives way to an increasingly intense bloom of chili. After another twenty seconds, the heat fades and you can take a second bite. Those foolish enough to wolf their cake down all at once can be seen sipping water or letting their mouths hang open.**

**(Open Tuesdays through Sundays for lunch and dinner. Entrées \$17-\$26.)**