



INSATIABLE CRITIC
GAEL GREENE

Crema Restaurante

That seriously grown-up \$12 margarita we are sipping at the new Crema sums up the tale. Julieta Ballesteros has graduated from teeny Mexicana Mama in the village to a narrow earth-toned spot of her own. There she is in the open kitchen, a small superwoman with a couple of slow-moving sidekicks watching every move, dishing up stylish plates of refined *cocina Mexicana*. Ribbons of hanger steak fill her taquitos, painted with a tomato-chorizo paste and the Mexican cream that gives this spot its name. The pleasant afterburn of impeccably cooked scallops with avocado and small corn tostados sets off irrepressible moans of pleasure. All of us are equally taken by a raucous family of textures in a salad with peanut guajillo vinaigrette. Entrées run from \$17 for a luscious chile relleno served with a black-bean broth to \$26 for the grilled rib eye. The flaw in the sweet-and-sour spare ribs—sweetness balanced against ancho chile and garlic—is that our greedy foursome could easily put away four more. An achiote paste made from annatto seeds makes a striking dress for broiled Chilean sea bass. Excuse my sticker shock, but it seems that \$10 desserts are the sweet leveler now. I guess the prices indicate the new level of ambition here. I'd choose roasted tropical fruits in a tequila-spiked mango soup, or espresso-coffee flan with caramelized pecans your dentist will appreciate (111 W. 17th St., nr. Sixth Ave.; 212-691-4477).