

SHAKEN AND STIRRED

## Sangria's Bold Cousin

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JULIETA BALLESTEROS is willing to concede that her Agua Loca — a superspiked, sangria-ish drink on the menu at Crema, the haute Mexican restaurant that she and her partners opened this month near Union Square — is the ideal beverage for your Cinco de Mayo celebration. She just doesn't get why you'll be celebrating.



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

"In Mexico we don't celebrate Cinco de Mayo," said Ms. Ballesteros, a native of Monterrey, Mexico, who is the former chef at Mexicana Mama in the West Village. "And I can't understand why you guys do. It's a bit confusing. It's a national holiday in Mexico, so the banks aren't open, but we don't celebrate it like we do our Independence Day in September." (Ms. Ballesteros excused herself, in fact, to check with someone in the kitchen to determine what precisely it is that Cinco de Mayo commemorates: "A battle between the French and Mexicans.")

But O.K., America, fiesta on. Chip and dip yourselves to high heaven. But please do Ms. Ballesteros a favor. Skip the sangria, that pitcher staple of Mexican restaurants from here to Wichita. "It's not Mexican at all," she said. "It's Spanish. Maybe it's because we're related to Spain." Ms. Ballesteros shrugged.

The Mexican alternative to sangria, Agua Loca, is as Mexico is to Spain: fresher, bolder, a poquito bit tougher. It has all the familiar wine and fruit of sangria without the diluting sodas; it's also packed with a double-fisted wallop of rum and vodka. (As one Crema bartender warned me, "It's more dangerous than it looks.")

At \$13 a glass, Crema's Agua Loca will set you back more than a half-carafe of sangria somewhere else. But then that's the whole point: With its sleek, adobe-hued interior and sleeker menu (the chiles rellenos get dressed up with a black bean broth), Crema aims high. Tequila shots are available, of course, but arrive graced with sides of freshly squeezed lime juice and sangrita, a fruit-and-tomato purée blended with chile de arbol.

For Ms. Ballesteros, who majored in international studies at the University of Monterrey before her yen for cooking brought her to the French Culinary Institute in New York, Agua Loca was the punch of choice at college and postgrad parties. It remains, for her, a liquid madeleine evoking those more freewheeling days. Agua Loca means crazy water, and Ms. Ballesteros explained, "You're always told, when you start drinking, that mixing different kinds of alcohol will make you crazy."

Not nearly as crazy, however, as watching millions of Americans toast Cinco de Mayo with glasses of Spanish sangria.

### **Adapted from Crema**

- 1 750-milliliter bottle vodka
- 1 750-milliliter bottle rum
- 1 750-milliliter bottle red wine
- 1 750-milliliter bottle white wine
- ½ gallon orange juice
- 24 ounces pineapple juice
- 1 46-ounce can cranberry juice
- 1 liter bottle tamarind juice\*
- 1 46-ounce bottle pear nectar
- 1 46-ounce bottle peach nectar
- 1 pint margarita mix\*
- 1 bunch mint
- 1 pineapple, cubed small
- 6 pears, cubed small
- 1 bunch seedless red grapes, quartered.

Mix all ingredients well and serve, chilled, over ice. Makes roughly three gallons.