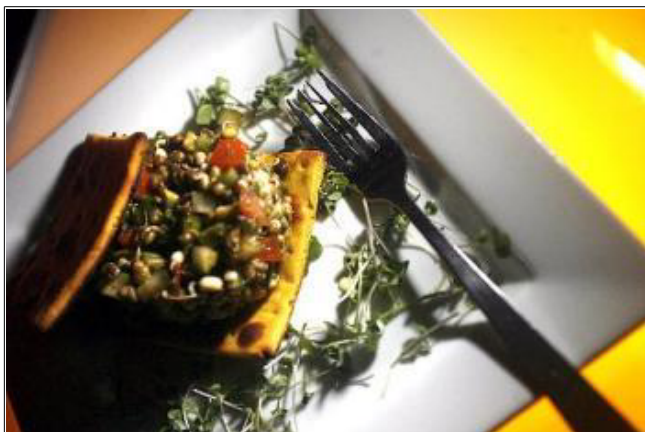


Spotighting less familiar cuisines



Liz Hafalia/Chronicle

The sprouted mung bean chaat salad at Junnoon is part of the trend of upscale Indian food throughout the country.

I love going to New York because it focuses my thoughts and helps me better understand some of the major trends in the food business. On many occasions, I meet colleagues from around the country and learn what trends are being nurtured in San Francisco ([communal tables](#)) and those that seem to have gone national, such as upscale Indian food.

I've [detailed this phenomenon](#) at places in the Bay Area -- Dosa, Junnoon and Mantra -- but I think these are part of a mega-trend of offering less familiar cuisine in upscale surroundings.

I went to two such places on my recent trip to New York: **CREMA** a neighborhood restaurant that serves upscale Mexican, and [Pera Mediterranean Brasserie](#), which serves Middle Eastern food heavily influenced by Turkey.

At **CREMA** we had traditional guacamole with onion, jalapeno, cilantro and lime, but chef Julieta Ballesteros also showed her creative side on her tostadas with pinto beans and slices of rare-cooked ostrich, glazed with a guava chile sauce. My friend who is a connoisseur thought it sounded ludicrous, but it turned out to be one of the best dishes of the evening.

The chef also crafted dishes with gentle twists: three soft flour tortillas -- one filled with pork, one with chicken and the other with chorizo -- sauteed with chipotle and drizzled with cream and strips of poblano chiles. Her empanadas are filled with huitlacoche (corn fungus), with portobello and goat cheese.

Pera Brasserie is one of the few upscale restaurants in New York that features an open kitchen. All the chefs wear black hats and surround the grill which is at the heart of the food here.

I loved the log of ground lamb, moistened with cheese, and the flatbread, blistered from the wood-burning oven and arranged with dollops of smoked eggplant, cloves of roasted garlic and a drizzle of heady olive oil.

While many of us may have had similar foods in modest surroundings, Pera offers a destination appeal with orange upholstered chairs, beautifully set table and flattering lighting.

It's exciting to see these chefs interpret the food and present it in a way that appeals to a wider audience, making it seem new and exciting.

Crema, 111 West 17th St., New York, N.Y.; (212) 691-4477.