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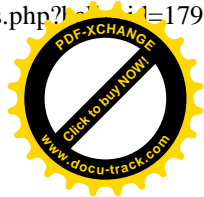
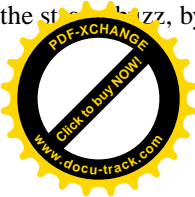
“Crema”, April 9, 2006

Occasion:	Cuisine:	Area:	Cost:	Rating:
Night Out	Latin/Mexican	Chelsea	Moderate	Good

Crema

Crema is the newest incarnation of the narrow 17th Street space that has been Snack, an American small plates restaurant, and then Sandia, a Mexican spot with a juicy watermelon theme. One has to wonder about troubled locations like these—whether it is the space that is cursed, or rather, the concept, the chef, or the restaurateur in particular that inhabits that space that ushers in a premature death. Crema, however, feels like it has the legs to stick around for more than the typical yearlong lifespan. The place has a cheery, unassuming vibe, with walls washed in coral tones, a sweet little curtained lounge up front, and a lean bar topped with vases of Birds of Paradise and oversized oblong bowls-as-trophies of crunchy tortilla chips. What mostly adds to its viability though, is the chef and owner, the lovely Julieta Ballesteros, well known for her cooking at her popular cantina, Mexicana Mama. Anyway, after a recap of the movie and a stop in at J. Crew where I discovered a pair of flip flops for \$250—sorry, but when did J. Crew become Sigerson Morrison?—we made our way over to Crema and settled into a table for four opposite the bar, a nice table in a slightly cramped area, but at least it was far enough from Frank Bruni that I didn't feel awkward not saying hello. I have met him before but I have no idea if he remembers me, and while I would have liked to have said hello, I didn't want to do anything to give away his cover to the owners. So I stayed put and sipped my margarita, discussing the movie with Alison and Jamie, while looking over Julieta's menu of modern Mexican fare.

Since guacamole may be one of my favorite foods (behind cheese which is my most favorite food), we started with an order for the table (\$12). It is playfully served in a mound in a giant spoon, set inside a colorful straw basket filled with crispy chips. The spoon was so big it was almost cartoonish, and had me picturing someone in the kitchen dipping this giant vessel into a massive vat of guacamole. Clearly there are no vats of guacamole here though. This stuff is fresh—made from just-right ripe avocados (not too firm, not too mushy), with minced onion, jalapeños, and a good splash of fresh lime juice. It was amply seasoned, nicely spicy and just perfect.



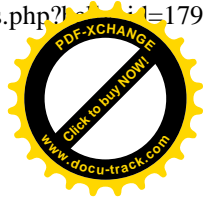
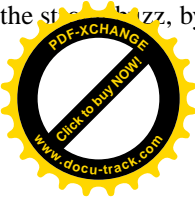
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Entrees are quite generous, so two are more than enough for three or even four people to share. While I would like to go back and try the spare ribs in a sweet and sour chile paste (\$22), we didn't think we had room for the ribs the other night. Instead, we shared the Robalo Chileno Estilo Yucatan (\$25), a sea bass broiled and crusted in a spicy achiote paste, served on a bed of plantain puree and topped with a pineapple escabeche, a sort of salsa that brightened up the fish and played nicely off the spicy crusted, silky fish. To the fish we added the Flautas de Pollo en Salsa de Aguacate y Tomatillo (\$18)—a quartet of crunchy tortilla tubes—think deep-fried Mexican blintzes—filled with the most tender pulled chicken marinated with red chiles, corn and caramelized onions and topped with a flashy green sauce made from avocados and tomatillos. We also demolished a couple of sides—one of refried beans (\$5), which were creamy, almost like a black bean pudding, and a bowl of fluffy green rice seasoned with poblano chiles and topped with a pile of fresh corn kernels, sheared straight from the cob. For dessert, we shared a chocolate mole cake, a disc of warm pudding cake steeped in a puddle of coconut milk that gave us just the right amount of sugar to end the night. Every night should end with a little sugar, you know.

As we were getting ready to go, the dining room was wall-to-wall super-fit Chelsea boys and very handsome well-groomed men in cashmere with their life partners. It's tough being a single woman in New York City when all the good ones are gay. But it does mean I have a lot of very handsome, very wonderful male friends who give me advice on skin care, treat me well and will love me longtime, as a friend, but nonetheless, truly and dependably. Looking around the restaurant as we prepared to leave, I thought we were the only women in the place. But then I peered inside the partially open kitchen and realized we were not alone. There was the lovely Julieta—the restaurant's chef-as-matriarch in the kitchen, turning out recipes that promise to cure this troubled locale and fill it with a long happy life as a wonderful slice of Mexico called Crema.

Crema is located at 111 West 17th Street (between 6th and 7th Avenue),



212-691-4477.

Andrea Strong

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