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TERRY DURACK RESTAURANT REVIEW

Adventures in Latin America

If the Next Big Thing is Peruvian food, as *The Wall Street Journal* suggests – and if top Peruvian chef Gaston Acurio is to open in Sydney, as reported in Good Living last month – then a little homework is required.

Key methods and ingredients will need to be learnt by rote, such as aji amarillo, a fruity yellow Peruvian chilli; pisco, Peruvian grape brandy, \$37.99 at Dan Murphy's; ceviche, diced fish marinated with lime juice and onion; and tiradito, thinly sliced fish similar to Japanese sashimi.

The next step is to strap on the P-plates and head off to the nearest Peruvian restaurant for a bit of groundwork. Right now, that's Morena, tucked into the St Margaret's residential complex in a space that was formerly fish-and-chipper The Battery.

Peruvian-born co-owner and chef Alejandro Saravia has cooked at Britain's Fat Duck, Sydney's Pier and Sails but now, with impeccable timing, he's going back to his Latin American roots.

The advantage of having architect Sumedh Kataria as business partner is immediately obvious. What was a clean white space is now darker and moodier, with sultry down-lighting, recycled timber screens, a momentous glass chandelier, smart chairs and wall-hugging banquettes upholstered with hand-woven Inca-inspired fabric.

Saravia's menu is a crash course in Peruvian and South American cooking, updated and re-evaluated. Caramelised pork belly comes with incaberry sauce; grilled barramundi is served with roasted Andean corn; an "Andean garden" (a mix of different potatoes cooked every which way) is served on a lima bean puree with quinoa soil; and there's even seared alpaca backstrap.

Both ceviche and tiradito fit into our recent love affair with all things raw and fishy, cured and marinated. Here, the ceviche is of diced pink snapper (\$20), with a punchy, fresh, lively taste. The classic Peruvian accompaniments of toasted corn (cancha) and sweet potato add crunch and sweetness.



THE ONE DISH YOU MUST TRY

Peruvian ceviche with pink snapper, cancha and caramelised sweet potato, \$20.

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Noble effort ... Morena's vibe is jovial and lively but the menu feels slightly formal. Photo: Tamara Dean

Tiradito is another kettle of fish altogether: the kingfish is cured for eight hours and thinly sliced, served with squid ink "caviar" (black ink-coloured tapioca) and herb oil (\$20). Without that crisp acidity pulling you back for more, it's less refreshing and less interesting than the ceviche.

Service is well-meaning, although the meaning can get a little lost among the typical early-days errors. The wine list dances through Argentina, Chile and Spain and includes a good-value, nicely balanced, 2010 unwooded LZ Tempranillo from pin-up Spanish winemaker Telmo Rodriguez (\$56).

Blame it on the deliciously frothy pisco sours (\$17) of pisco, lime juice, sugar syrup, bitters and egg white but by mid-evening the place is party central, with a loud and proud Latin American accent. Oddly, the general loosening-up isn't reflected in the food.

Argentinean-style asado beef ribs (\$32) – normally an invitation to gnaw happily at meat cooked on the bone – appears as a neat log of meat, reassembled without the bones. Where's the fun in that?

Morena

Address Shop 15/425 Bourke Street, Surry Hills, 0405 902 896, morena.com.au.

Open Dinner Tue-Sat; brunch Sun, 11am-4pm.

Licensed Yes.

Cost About \$120 for two, plus wine

Next to it is a sparky beetroot puree, some cooked golden beetroot and a puddle of chimichurri (garlic and parsley salsa) that kicks things along. Alpaca (\$34) also gets a smart treatment, the two pink-centred plugs of seared backstrap nestled against a spicy, stewy mix of diced potato known as carapulcra, with an addictive celeriac puree, and an unusual but traditional coriander-and-beer sauce. Cooked sous-vide, the meat is rosily pink but chewy and mild, without the flavour hit of lamb or the gaminess of venison.

The "tres leches" pud (\$15) gets closer to the real deal; a square of sponge soaked in three different milks (condensed, evaporated and full cream) and served with smooth

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pineapple ice cream, pineapple puree and custard. It's a hit, tasting almost as Country Womens' Association Australia as it does South American.

Morena has a great sense of life, and the kitchen works hard to present a sophisticated, classy side of Peruvian cuisine. I wonder if it isn't missing a trick by not relaxing more into its own culture. We've already seen at Porteno how South American food can be high-quality without being cheffy.

The more this sort of food gets manipulated, the more it loses its vitality, its directness, its mojo.

The Next Big Thing? Maybe, when the kitchen loosens up and has as much fun as the diners. tdurack@smh.com.au