LV Mar: One Man, Four Pillars

By Emily Mangini

Chef Manuel Martinez of LV Mar (2042 Broadway) is not one for drama. Soft-spoken and humble, he won't soon be auditioning to take Gordon Ramsay's place in Hell's Kitchen. But don't be fooled. Watch as Martinez scans his restaurant like a hawk, exposing the galvanized perfectionist beneath the friendly smile. "Every dish that I create must meet my four pillars — does it have a Latin influence? A seasonal ingredient? If yes, then I give it my foundation, my flare, and use the proper (culinary) techniques I've learned along the way," Martinez says. "I like to experiment and be inspired by Latin cuisine and fresh ingredients. I want to elevate each dish with my own twist. I don't want it to be good, I want it to be excellent."

Martinez's commitment to tradition and excellence can be attributed to both his childhood and his 20-year career in the fine dining industry. As a child, Martinez and his parents would leave their home in San Augustin, near Mexico City, and visit his grandparent's farm in the state of Jalisco. There a young Martinez witnessed firsthand the rewards of cooking with fresh ingredients. "I would help in the corn field, and then go into the house and make fresh tortillas with my grandma." This early exposure to farm-to-table eating planted a seed in Martinez. This seed, cooking with fresh, seasonal ingredients, would blossom

years later, in a city and country far from the farms of Jalisco.

Flash forward, fresh out of high school and hungry for a worldly experience, Martinez left San Augustin for San Francisco. Joining a friend who was working as a dishwasher at the Iron Horse on Maiden Lane, Martinez unknowingly began his career. "At the time, I didn't know that it was going to be my passion," Martinez says, reflecting on those early years. As he worked his way from dishwasher to line cook, line to prep cook, something clicked for Martinez. "It wasn't until I started working in kitchens that I realized, hey, remember your grandma, remember those influences, this is for her. And that's when I really started focusing on cooking and creating."

Martinez continued his way up the culinary ladder, becoming a sought-after gourmet chef. With each rung, he cultivated his hand in French, Italian and American cuisines. Though LV Mar is Latin-inspired, he recognizes the hold that the sauce-heavy French and Italian traditions have on him. Martinez says with a laugh, "My guys must hate me, because I have 30 to 50 sauces. Each dish must have its own sauce."

"I want to create a place where people come not just to eat, but to relax and make good memories," Martinez explains. And succeed he has. It's easy to melt into the restaurant and be swept away by the art-

fully crafted menu. At LV Mar, chips and salsa are replaced by fritura mixtas, a medley of fried plantains, taro, yucca and corn tortillas, served with a house-made manchamanteles aioli. The aioli, like all of Martinez's sauces, begs to be savored to the very last drop, and it's easy to oblige. And then there are the blue corn tortillas. Particularly fantastic with the melted Oaxaca cheese and wild mushrooms dish, Fundido de Queso; it's knowing that the art of tortillas was learned at his grandmother's knee that makes them so special.

Entrées such as the Solomillo a la Parrilla, a hangar steak with house-made chorizo and potato croquettes, or the Pescado Con Pepitas, a pumpkin seed crusted halibut, continue to showcase Martinez's talents. It quickly becomes hard to choose to just one entrée. The paradox of choice continues in the dessert course. Martinez takes the classic drink horchata and churns a creamy ice cream topped with an almond tuille, but then offers a flourless chocolate cake with mezcal creme anglaise that is more truffle than cake. The only solution is to come with a party, and order everything. And Martinez is OK with that. "All are welcome," he says with a smile. And with a flash, he's back to business, making sure that every sauce, dish and customer experience is not just good, it's excellent.

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