

La Viga: Seafood, Cucina Latina-style

Since the opening of La Viga five years ago, Chef Manuel Martinez has been on the fast track to Redwood City's heart. Located on the outskirts of the downtown area, at 1772 Broadway, La Viga didn't have the luxury of "location, location, location." What Martinez did have was food, good food.

At La Viga, fresh seafood is prepared in dishes so meticulously plated they offer a study of contrasts in the quaint, "hole-in-the-wall" aesthetic of the restaurant. News spread about Martinez' Dungeness crab-spiked guacamole, bright ceviches and tapas inspired by the sea. A loyal following grew, and he found himself the caterer of choice for local businesses and organizations alike. The journey is all the more meaningful to Martinez this month, during which he and his team celebrate La Viga's fifth anniversary.

Before Martinez and La Viga were established, the seasoned chef was buoyed only by his vision of using fresh, quality ingredients to craft Latin-inspired, seafood-focused dishes. "After working as a chef for many years and working with many different ingredients, I fell in love... from fish to shrimp to lobster." While seafood is a staple in Mexican cuisine, Martinez opted for what he calls a "cucina Latina" influence. This allowed him the chance to pull his inspiration and ingredients from all over Latin America, including Mexico, Argentina, Peru, Venezuela and Colombia.

Though Martinez honed his skill for selecting and preparing fresh seafood



during his 20-year tenure as a chef, his love of sea fare was planted much earlier. The name La Viga, is inspired by his hometown's massive seafood market by the same name. Martinez lights up as he relates his memories of walking the halls of the market, eating fresh shrimp and octopus cocktail, or fried tilapia served simply on a sheet of paper, accompanied by hot sauce for dipping.

Eating at La Viga is like strolling the halls of its namesake market with Martinez alongside. Pulpos Salteados, a medley of fresh octopus and calamari served in a fennel, garlic and saffron broth, reward the diner who chooses to follow his lead. It's worth noting here that calamari, while so often relegated to the deep fryer, is celebrated at La Viga, served in ways that highlight the squid's curlicue spirals and decidedly non-rubbery texture. At La Viga, Martinez has nothing to hide or mask.

When it comes to ceviche, it's almost as if Martinez couldn't contain his excitement and creativity: Whereas most seafood-focused restaurants offer, maybe, a single ceviche, Martinez offers four, including the mahi-mahi and mango Cevi-

che de Dorado, and the Ceviche de Camarones, made of shrimp in a cucumber and cilantro broth. Vibrant and refreshing, they whet the appetite, even on the dreariest of rain-soaked days.

While land-based options are available, it's in the seafood dishes -- like the tapas Camarones con Tamarindo containing jumbo prawns artfully arranged with mandarin wedges on a just-spicy-enough tamarind sauce -- that Martinez shines. And though fish tacos are a dime a dozen in California, none are quite like the Pescado, a simple but packed-with-flavor taco of crispy red snapper dolloped with creamy chipotle and cured cabbage.

It is clear that for Martinez, his foundation is built on an unrelenting commitment to quality -- both in food and in the customer experience. "I'm always looking for ways to bring new guests, new businesses, ways to deliver better service, improve the service and value as well," he said.

Indeed, the wheels are always churning for Martinez, especially since he juggles La Viga with his second restaurant, LV Mar, located in the hub of downtown Redwood City. But on the occasion of La Viga's fifth anniversary, Martinez leaves time to pause and reflect on how far he and his team have come. "Who would imagine that out of a hole-in-the-wall place, outside of the downtown part, we would do such a great job serving, and now supporting the community as well. Everything is possible. It's just fantastic."

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