Food / Review

Poca Madre starts to sparkle

By Tom Sietsema
Food critic
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This review appears in The Washington Post's 2019 Fall Dining Guide as No. 6 on a list of the year's top 10 restaurants.

Crispy puffed masa, smoked whitefish, crémeda and trout roe make up the "Everything" ceviche at Poca Madre in D.C. (Deb Lindsey/For The Washington Post)

6. Poca Madre

★★★☆ (Excellent)

If you want to chart how for this Mexican hideaway has traveled since it opened, ask for the charred cabbage. Singed leaves might not sound like a game-changer, but they sure taste like one when they're arranged with spoonfuls of shredded oxtail "jam" on a pale green, heat-packing mole that fairly pulses with cilantro, mint and ground seeds. My point: Vegetables are getting starring roles, and meat is being used more like a garnish. Indeed, one of the most enticing ceviches here revolves around mango compressed with chiles and lime and finished with candied Fresno pepper and dark splotches of charred habanero oil, an accent chef-owner Victor Albisu likes so much he says, "I put it on everything," even eggs at breakfast.

The chef has a playful side. "Everything" inflaulita stuffs smoked whitefish in delicate fried tortilla cups, and panko-crisped halibut gets slipped between a steamed bun slathered with chipotle cream. It's a Filet-o-Fish, si, but superior in every way to the one at McDonald's. If there's one dish Albisu says he can't take off the list, it's fried chicken set on a much-improved black mole enriched with foie gras. All the dish needs is a sparkling salad to counter the decadence, and that it gets, along with excellent blue corn tortillas.

Diners at the bar area at Poca Madre. (Deb Lindsey/For The Washington Post)

Has it been a while since your last visit to the moody dining room? Never tried the restaurant, whose service keeps pace with the kitchen? You're missing out. Poca Madre is at the top of its game.

3 stars (Excellent)

Poca Madre: 777 I St. NW. 202-838-5300. *pocamadredc.com* .

Open: Dinner daily.

Prices: Small plates $12-$33, large sharing plates $46-$110.

Sound check: 70 decibels / Conversation is easy.

The Top 10 restaurants of 2019:

10. Thamee

9. Anju

8. Three Blacksmiths

7. Mama Chang

6. Poca Madre

5. The Restaurant at Patowmack

4. Métier

3. Pineapple and Pearls

2. Rooster & Owl

1. Seven Reasons

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The following review appeared in The Washington Post's 2018 Fall Dining Guide.

Pate at pastor — slow-roasted duck at Poca Madre. (Deb Lindsey/For the Washington Post)

Poca Madre isn't your mother's Mexican restaurant

★★☆☆ (Good/Excellent)

The chef behind some of the best tacos in the region upped his game this year by introducing Mexican fine dining as it's practiced in Mexico, where, says Victor Albisu, diners are getting "smacked in the face with flavor and hospitality." Having impressed carnivores at Del Campo, the South American grill that gave way to Poca Madre, the chef is now earning high-fives for crisp octopus set on a blond mole of almonds, plantains, habanero and white chocolate, and slow-cooked duck made luscious with pineapple, chipotle and more. Want to hear an inside joke? While Albisu vowed never to serve burritos at his fast-casual Taco Bamba, he's peddling a blingy bundle here: house-made tortillas rolled up with sweet lobster, wagyu beef, Arborio rice and caviar and priced at $32. People love it or not, unlike the rest of dinner here, where a gratis cocktail, likely incorporating mezcal, eases you into the elegant-but-relaxed dining room, which exemplifies upscale dining in 2018.

2.5 stars

Poca Madre: 777 I St. NW. 202-838-5300. pocamadredc.com.

Open: Dinner daily.

Price: Mains $18-$24.

Sound check: 70 decibels / Conversation is easy.

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The following review originally published July 25, 2018.

The Ziggy Stardust Margarita. (Deb Lindsey/For the Washington Post)

Chef-owner Victor Albisu at Poca Madre. (Deb Lindsey/For the Washington Post)

A chef steeped in tacos takes Mexican cuisine on an upscale ride

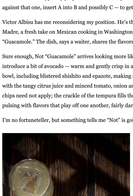
★★☆☆ (Good/Excellent)

Let me say from the start that I'm not a fan of deconstructed food, which almost always suffers in comparison to the dish as it's typically prepared, which is to say *complete*. Why make diners work — push this ingredient against that one, insert A into B and possibly C — to get some semblance of the full effect?

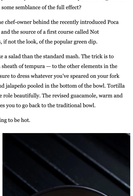
Victor Albisu has me reconsidering my position. He's the chef-owner behind the recently introduced Poca Madre, a fresh take on Mexican cooking in Washington and the source of a first course called Not "Guacamole." The dish, says a waiter, shares the flavors, if not the look, of the popular green dip.

Sure enough, Not "Guacamole" arrives looking more like a salad than the standard mash. The trick is to introduce a bit of avocado — warm and gently crisp in a sheath of tempura — to the other elements in the bowl, including blistered shishito and epazote, making sure to dress whatever you've speared on your fork with the tangy citrus juice and minced tomato, onion and jalapeño pooled in the bottom of the bowl. Tortilla chips need not apply; the crackle of the tempura fills the role beautifully. The revised guacamole, warm and pulsing with flavors that play off one another, fairly dares you to go back to the traditional bowl.

I'm no fortuneteller, but something tells me "Not" is going to be hot.



Not "Guacamole." (Deb Lindsey/For the Washington Post)



Shrimp and cuttlefish ceviche. (Deb Lindsey/For the Washington Post)

Poca Madre replaces the left flank of Del Campo, Albisu's dashing South American grill, which closed in March near Chinatown after a five-year run. The remaining space is devoted to Taco Bamba, the chef's rousing fast-casual concept. The restaurants share an address and a kitchen but maintain separate entrances. The door to Poca Madre opens to a narrow room with seating on multiple levels and a small bar that dispenses a gratis, nightly changing libation, most recently a restorative shot of mezcal blended with Aperol, honey and lime. That and some nubby, C3-size corn tostadas, delivered with a zesty salsa, hint of good things to come.

And that they do. Along with the rethought guacamole, dinner should commence with cuttlefish and shrimp that have been transformed into broad "noodles" and labeled ceviche with the help of abundant fresh herbs and coconut milk swirled with lime juice. As the "pasta" is being devoured, a minder comes over and pours a splash of smoky mezcal into the bowl, encouraging us to taste the broth anew. If lightning in the tropics could be captured as a flavor, this would be it. The table should also be introduced to the very good corn risotto, punched up with epazote leaves, cinged with cotija and popcorn to accentuate the featured attraction, and finished with dots of huitlacoche puree and shaved Oregon truffles, a reminder, should you need one, that you're not eating at Guapo's. (Poca Madre is the uncommon Mexican restaurant to offer wine from the country, samples of which servers are happy to pour.)

Octopus has overtaken tuna tartare as the most everywhere appetizer in contemporary restaurants, which gets no complaints from me when the creature is served as originally as at Poca Madre. The kitchen braises the octopus so it's tender, then crisps it with a plunge in the fryer. The result is brushed with squid ink, sprinkled with sesame seeds and stacked on a white mole whipped up from almonds, plantains, habanero and white chocolate. Eat and repeat until the lot is no more.

The contemporary setting, by designer Maggie O'Neill of Swatchroom, makes a seductive frame for the food. Look up and you see plants intertwined with a string of lights, or fixtures in the shape of outsize sombreros. Behind the host stand is a painting of "Border Door," the 1988 photograph by artist Richard Lou depicting the U.S.-Mexican border. The stark image is meant to convey inclusiveness, says Albisu, whose background is Cuban and Peruvian and whose résumé and travels have steeped him in Mexican culture.

Here and there, Albisu shows his cheeky side. Take the name of the place: Poca Madre (literally, "little mother") is Spanish slang for "cool," says the chef. He also found a clever way to add a burrito to his refined collection of dishes, and justify the bundle's $32 price. Inside two upright towers of housemade flour tortillas, one finds sweet lobster, succulent Wagyu beef, a tinder of black beans paired with avocado leaves and truffles and fancy Arborio rice — an extravaganza capped with a garnish of shimmering caviar. Excessive? Sure. Delicious? Same. The chef says he happened to think up the indulgence while watching the HBO documentary "Elvis Presley: The Searcher." Hence the name for the dish — "The King" — and a plate emblazoned with the singer's portrait.

Of course, there are large plates for sharing. If you haven't noticed that restaurants of all stripes want you to share, share, share, where have you been eating? At Poca Madre, the most intriguing platter features a whole duck that has been slow-cooked and made luscious with pineapple, chipotle and mild and fruity guajillo chile. The fall-apart fowl comes with an herb salad, a nice pause between bites of the rich duck. Almost as good is pork festooned with red bell peppers, mint and cilantro and positioned atop eggplant crema.

Corn risotto with huitlacoche, truffles and popcorn. (Deb Lindsey/For the Washington Post)

Swordfish ceviche Veracruzano. (Deb Lindsey/For the Washington Post)

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