



Walk through the doorway into Poca Madre and you're immediately confronted with another door. Cracked open and covered with keys, it's an image of Richard Lou's 1988 "Border Door" installation at the U.S.-Mexico border. The original was a symbolic welcome to migrants arriving in America. Here it seems to usher guests down south to explore the culinary culture that inspired Victor Albus's latest venture while reminding guests that doors symbolize an opening and a welcoming spirit.

The chef, who has Cuban and Peruvian roots, traveled extensively throughout Mexico to find inspiration for Poca Madre (it means "really cool" and is a common slang phrase used in Mexico City). He points specifically to revelatory meals he enjoyed at El Destilado in Oaxaca and Mexico City's Pujol. But his modern Mexican restaurant doesn't offer any straight-up classics; he's focused on forging next-generation fare that weaves in traditional ingredients and techniques. The eatery is a comeback of sorts for Albus; it occupies the back half of the space that once held his South American steakhouse, Del Campo, which he shuttered earlier this year. The front is now

NO BORDERS

Victor Albus's new Poca Madre breaks down barriers with its forward-thinking Mexican fare, welcoming environment and overall ethos.

By Nevin Martell // Photography by Greg Powers

another location of his burgeoning Taco Bamba mini-chain specializing in envelope-pushing tacos and crafty cocktails.

Swatchroom's Maggie O'Neill oversaw a refresh of the space, blessing it with an airy naturalism. Twinkle lights intertwine with vinery floating above the dining room on one side, while the other side's fixtures look like wire frames for upside-down picture hats. White and gray walls are offset by flashes of green. And there's a fetching Frida Kahlo-esque painting at the far end of the 68-seat establishment.

Dinner begins with a little something from the bar. A recent welcome libation was singani-powered mango-orange punch. (A nonalcoholic option is provided to those not imbibing.) This gracious kickoff will leave you

From top: The snapper aguachile is a colorful, textural amalgamation of everything from serranos to yuzu to trout roe; the decor sizzles with eye candy stemming from artful light fixtures, vibrant hues and rustic hip furnishings, all the work of Swatchroom.



wanting more. For tantalizing twists, opt for the Fluffy Paloma capped off with marshmallowy foam and packing a pleasingly bitter bite or the indulgent Fat Duck Old-Fashioned sweetened with foie gras honey. Those looking to walk on the wild side can check out the mezcal-pumped Charlie & the Chapuline Factory, garnished with dried grasshopper—it's crunchy and salty, and could be confused for puffed rice if your eyes were closed. As you sip, use a crackly tostada to dig into complimentary fresh-made salsa; it's composed

a new way almost every day.

The menu selections are arrayed from lightest to heaviest, culminating with a trio of large-format entrees designed for two or more diners. Cevichelike snapper aguachile is a riot of flavors and colors. Serrano peppers, grapefruit, avocado, yuzu, basil and trout roe dress up the fish with pops of heat, acid, brine and herbaceousness. Another ceviche features hamachi crusted with hibiscus-infused sea salt. It sits in a pool of corn and roasted garlic puree, and comes lavished with a hibiscus dressing pepped by Kaffir

lime. In a riff on *huachinango a la Veracruzana*, seared scallops are paired with golden-fried sweetbreads, along with capers, olives and charred tomatoes. The results evoke the country and the seaside in a single bite.

There's a high-minded play on *esquites* (grilled corn salad) in the form of a corn risotto that Albus calls *huitsquites*. Shaved truffles and huitlacoche (corn fungus) bring funky vibes; classic Tajin spice mix adds an everyman element; and there's crunch thanks to some scattered popcorn. Meanwhile, al pastor-style duck is cured and confited with achiote and chipotle before being roasted to order and served with scratch-made masa tortillas and a sweet pineapple sauce. Don't miss the fried chicken, frizzled golden and drizzled with agave syrup. It arrives on a black blanket of Oaxacan mole amped with foie gras to give the dark sauce an even deeper richness.

Multicomponent, multitexture desserts all come in bowls. Albus's Peruvian

Clockwise from left: Poca Madre's dessert selection is creative and ends the meal with a final showcase of Victor Albus's inventive interpretation of Mexican cuisine, like the *suspiro Mexicano* with elements such as corn three ways and a passion fruit gelee; the Burrito "The King" with wagyu, lobster, caviar and black truffle—black beans is a rich, decadent twist; the Fluffy Paloma with Siembra Azul tequila, grapefruit juice, vanilla and mineragua.



Mez Whiz

As the restaurant's agave-leaf logo implies, mezcal is the focus of the beverage program. Service Director Michael Iglesias carefully compiled a list of more than 70 boutique bottles—some of which he personally discovered on his frequent trips to Mexico and handcarries back to the States—including rare options infused with *ibérico* ham, corn and cannabis.



Fit for a King

There's no burrito offered next door at Albus's Taco Bamba, so he made one for Poca Madre that features all the things. Served on a commemorative Elvis Presley plate, the regal creation is packed full of wagyu beef, caviar, truffled black beans, shaved truffles, lobster chunks and creamy robiola cheese.



grandmother was famous for her *suspiro limeño*: It typically has dulce de leche-like manjar blanco topped with meringue. The version at Poca Madre, dubbed *suspiro Mexicano*, crowns the caramely core with corn three ways—foam, charred cornhusk, caramel popcorn—and passion fruit gelee for a sweetly tart punch.

It's a clever finale, incorporating Albus's roots, while paying homage to the *maíz* that is at the root of so much Mexican cooking. Like Poca Madre itself, it is built on traditions, but has its eyes on the future. ■

POCA MADRE

777 I St. NW, 202.838.5300, pocamadrec.com

Appetizers, \$8-\$14; entrees, \$18-\$49; large-format entrees, \$46-\$110

Sun.-Thu., 5-10PM; Fri.-Sat., 5-11PM