



Dining: Tom Sietsema

Guac that's not. A bedazzled burrito. Meet a new Mexico.

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.

POCA MADRE
★★★★☆
(Good/Excellent)

777 I St. NW
(entrance to the left of Taco Bamba).
202-838-5300.
pocamadredc.com.

Open: Dinner daily.
Prices: Appetizers \$8 to \$14, main courses \$16 to \$120 (rib-eye to share).
Sound check: 70 decibels / Conversation is easy.

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

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, CD-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,

PHOTO: DEB LINDSEY

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This page from top:

Kate Casaday, center, dines at Poca Madre; chef-owner Victor Albisu.

Opposite page:

The Ziggy Stardust cocktail mixes a mezcal margarita, summer fruits and liquid nitrogen.

Previous page:

Slow-roasted duck with pineapple, onions, cilantro and corn tortillas.

this would be it. The table should also be introduced to the very good corn risotto, punched up with epazote leaves, ringed 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 binder of black beans pureed 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