

RESTAURANT REVIEW



El Tule

Reviewed by Robin Damstra, James Salant

Posted May 18, 2012

Do you like this story?

Like 17 people like this. Be the first of your friends.

Share 51 Tweet 5 ShareThis 62 Like 0

[Click here to view the original story](#)



Of the two maxims—"Don't put all your eggs in one basket," and the 19th century inversion, "Put all your eggs in one basket, *and watch that basket!*"—restaurants are usually better off heeding the latter. It's hard enough to get one dish right, let alone dozens in different styles. That's why a useful rule of thumb is, the longer the menu, the more suspect the food. El Tule, on Main Street in Lambertville, is a glorious exception.

El Tule not only has a long menu; it has two long menus: Mexican and Peruvian. Initially there was one menu of Mexican dishes, with everything from tacos (the meat always juicy, the soft corn tortillas made in house and expertly charred) to flautas

Mexicanas (rolled tacos with a balanced assembly of sour cream, avocado sauce and pico de gallo) to mojo de ajo (an entrée of shrimp in an incredibly rich red garlic sauce, served with outstanding dirty rice and refried beans).

A Peruvian special was offered each weekend. "We had no idea how people would react to these flavors," says Jack M. Egoavil, the general manager. "The history of Peru is essentially a history of colonization, with all these different cultures leaving their marks on our cuisine. So you have African influence, you have Spanish influence, you have the native Inca influence. And the countryside itself is also incredibly diverse, stretching from the Pacific Coast, where we get the inspiration for our ceviches, all the way to the Andes, where many of the stews come from, stews that incorporate over 3,000 types of potato and 35 types of corn."

The response to the specials was so positive that not one of them failed to make the menu. "We went from being really nervous about serving any of this food to being really excited about introducing all aspects of Peruvian cuisine to Lambertville," says Egoavil.

How does the restaurant make all this work? "We have two chefs, for one thing," says Egoavil. "My mother [Carmen Egoavil] cooks the Peruvian dishes, and she's been cooking all her life, though never in a restaurant before. My brother-in-law [Said Anguiano] cooks the Mexican dishes; he worked for about a year at Marsha Brown's in New Hope. We're just all passionate about food."

Every employee is a family member (hence the name, El Tule, a double-entendre referring to an actual tree in Mexico with a nearly 40-inch trunk, and figuratively to a family tree). The devout family attended St. John's Catholic Church in Lambertville, where about a year ago, they heard about a restaurant closing just up the street and decided to combine their savings.

Now, in the dining room, Peruvian paintings and tapestries hang on orange walls; cultural knickknacks sit on windowsills; and a blackboard describing specials hangs above the uncurtained entrance to the pint-size kitchen. The place is booming, and somehow the cooks keep up. People are sipping horchata (a light Mexican drink made from rice and condensed milk), chicha morada (a Peruvian purple-corn drink from the Andes, similar to a cola, that's as refreshing as it is exotic) and atole de vainilla (a mixture of milk, sweet corn, vanilla and cinnamon—thick and warm—a Mexican concoction as comforting as hot cocoa).

People are smiling faintly, eyes closed, bowing their heads in olfactory benediction over cau cau de mariscos, as if their own mothers used to whip up this delectable Afro-Peruvian stew of shrimp, mussels, potatoes and calamari. Oatmeal soup con queso fresco induces similar blissful solemnity. Probably the most familiar item to the American palate, it's like a cross between barley and chicken soup, only the oatmeal husks are thinner than People around us are downright inhaling carapulcra and seco de cordero con frijoles canarios, our two favorite entrées—the first, a rich stew of pork and Andean dried potatoes complemented by baked yucca sticks; the second, a braised, falling-off-the-bone lamb shoulder with a side of tender, flavorful canary beans that not only stands up to the heavily spiced, rich, red meat, but almost steals the show.

The ceviches are exciting and fun. The delicate balance of acidity from lime juice and sweetness from corvina fish is perfect. Garnishes of Peruvian yellow and limo peppers add both crunch and subtle complexity to all the varieties. Inca corn, served on the side, brings more texture and a toasted nuttiness that couldn't contrast better with the perfectly resistant pieces of fish. Ceviche Nikkei, a Japanese fusion variation, has a ginger sauce that, though flavorful, never overwhelms the basic balance.

Even desserts are winning. Tres leches is moist but not heavy, and just sweet enough. Rum rice pudding, yummily gooey, has enough tooth in the kernels to keep the texture multi-dimensional.

You can stop in for a quick lunch and have one of the best sandwiches around, the torta Cubana: fried headcheese, jalapeño peppers, refried beans and queso Oaxaca (similar to Monterey Jack), all pressed like a panini between two slices of baguette. At dinner the choice might be fusion ceviches and causa de pollo: elegantly plated yellow potato cakes stuffed with chicken and vegetables.

If El Tule has succeeded at putting its eggs in several baskets, it has at the same time managed to invert another piece of everyday wisdom: It tries to please everyone (or everyone open to delving into these two distinctive cuisines) and actually seems to do so—starting with the two of us.

If you like this article please share it.

51 Share 5 Tweet 2 Email 62 ShareThis 0 Like 17 Like

Follow us on Twitter
 Become a fan on Facebook