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DINING OUT

Peruvian food and fun at Caracota

Chef Tamara Chavez brings a dose of friendly hospitality and comfort food to this new breezy eatery in Dempsey.

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by

JAIME EE ✉ jaime@sph.com.sg 🐦 [@JaimeEeBT](https://twitter.com/JaimeEeBT)

NEW RESTAURANT

Canchita SG

9A, 9B Dempsey Road

Singapore 247698

Tel: 6232 7895

Open for lunch and dinner Tues to Fri: 12pm to 2.30pm; 6pm to 10.30pm. Sat and Sun: 11.30am to 10.30pm. Closed on Mon.

FOR the longest time, ceviche and us have never got along. We come from different schools of thought in which we believe food is meant for our pleasure, not as weapons of palate destruction. Food should be kind, pretty, and eager to please. Ceviche, on the other hand, thinks that having your eyes gouged out, bathed in lemon juice and then replaced in their sockets while you scream is the height of any gourmet experience.

So, we've established that acid is not our friend, especially when it's hidden in the innocuous-sounding tiger's milk - a lethal blend of citrus, salt and chilli - that instantly scares any bacteria out of raw fish and turns it into the national dish of Peru.

But along comes Tamara Chavez, the Mother Teresa of ceviche who whispers soothing words and instantly tames the wild acidity into a compliant and refreshingly piquant appetiser - making Canchita a rare Peruvian restaurant we actually want to go to.

Canchita is housed in one of the sprawling blocks in Dempsey below street level. Surrounded by greenery, there's more of it sprouting from the ceiling of its conservatory-like, rainforest-inspired surroundings. The easy-going, affable vibe is matched by the demeanour of chef Chavez, whose endearing Mexican accent lends credibility - or at least a Latin American twang - to a menu that's full of heart and substance.

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And we mean substance in more ways than one. This is carb-central - think pureed beans, potatoes, corn and rice, sometimes all on the same plate. You may throw up your hands in defeat by the time you get to the main course, but not without appreciating how chef Chavez has so totally adapted to the Singapore palate that any Peruvian purist's disdain is our gain.

Perhaps the first cardinal sin she breaks is in the Ceviche Mixto (S\$28), a perky and refreshing broth of fish stock, lime juice, Peruvian chilli that covers a mixture of raw and cooked fish, shrimp and scallops garnished with raw sliced onions. Crunchy deep-fried calamari is a surprising but perfect match. Eat the ceviche with an order of Patacones (S\$14) - deep fried plantain chips served with creamy, chunky guacamole. Dunk the chips into the tiger's milk and scoop up some of the ceviche for extra texture and crunch.

Peruvian food is said to be the result of many different nationalities - Chinese, Japanese, Africans, Italians - who ended up in Peru and found nothing they wanted to eat. So they had to come up with their own food, combining memories of home with whatever they could find in the local markets. It was the Japanese who took octopus - one of the cheapest ingredients that locals didn't want - and turned it into tender, bouncy morsels that even non-Japanese can't get enough of. Here, it appears in Pulpo a la Brasa (S\$32) - a thick, grilled tentacle that's slightly too tenderised for our taste but still more than acceptable, on a bed of lima bean puree and mashed avocado. Crunchy quinoa and crispy garlic alternate the mouth feel so it doesn't get boring.

The real winner is the tacos (from S\$16 up) - true blue Mexican style with flour or corn tortillas, not the crunchy shells of the Tex-Mex variety. Although fish tacos are only on the menu on Tuesdays, ask for it anyway and the kitchen will oblige. You'll want it because the fish nuggets are crunchy and almost creamy within, smeared with beans, avocado, spicy mayo and a quartet of sauces for you to experiment with. There's a fiery red and green chilli dip that will kill you but with a lovely lingering finish. Crispy pork belly with corn tortilla is equally good but our money is on the fish.

It's torture but you just got to do it. Check out Lomo Saltado (S\$42) aka Peruvian Chinese food, for some serious wok hei in stir-fried juicy tenderloin cubes tossed in a sort-of black pepper sauce without the black pepper, piled on top of tender potato chips (apparently the real McCoy comes with rice and potatoes but chef Chavez spares you from going into carb shock).

And for the Peruvian version of paella with a Chinese accent, there's Arroz con Mariscos (S\$34) - kind of seafood risotto using cold cooked long grain rice and fish broth with lime and chilli. It's tangy, quite citrusy and almost tomato-ey, with fresh shrimp and topped with whole grilled crayfish.

Peruvians love their milk and if you like your sweetness thick and cloying, there's Tres Leches (S\$14) soaked in a triple heart attack combo of evaporated milk, coconut milk and heavy cream, topped with strawberries and a custardy sauce. Or Arroz con Leches (S\$14) - creamy rice pudding perfumed with cinnamon and

studded with raisins that is the least lethal of the trio. Otherwise, raise the stakes with Alfajores (S\$14) - a crumbly cookie sandwiched with dulce de leche and paired with pineapple compote.

Canchita is no gourmet paradise but neither is Peruvian cooking anyway. But what it has is an underlying joy and the sense that in the face of acidity, flavour and friendship will prevail.

Rating: 7

WHAT OUR RATINGS MEAN

10: The ultimate dining experience

9-9.5: Sublime

8-8.5: Excellent

7-7.5: Good to very good

6-6.5: Promising

5-5.5: Average

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