

CASUAL DINING REVIEW

Restaurants 

Posted on Thu, Aug. 10, 2006

Heights of Andean cuisine at El Gran Inka

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ON KEY BISCAZYNE: El Gran Inka manager Carlos Ugarizza displays arroz con mariscos, left, corvina ceviche and a trio of seafood carpaccios -- corvina, octopus and salmon.



Peru has sparked the culinary imaginations of chefs worldwide. It is, after all, where famed Nobu Matsuhisa found much of the inspiration for his precious raw fish concoctions and skewered meats.

One of the original fusion cuisines, Peruvian brings Latin, Spanish, Italian, African, Chinese and Japanese influences to bear on an amazing diversity of ingredients, from incredibly fresh fish to an impossible variety of potatoes, corn and chiles.

Regional Peruvian restaurants have taken hold in food-forward areas like the Mission District of San Francisco and Queens, N.Y., but until recently, they were something of an aberration in our otherwise pan-Latin city.

That's changing fast. Among the newest is El Gran Inka, an endearing little spot tucked away in the Winn-Dixie Plaza on Crandon Boulevard that's part of a chain with locales in Costa Rica, Guatemala and El Salvador.

That El Inka's only U.S. outpost is on Key Biscayne was either a stroke of genius or just plain good luck. The place is packed every night, though if you arrive before 7:30 p.m., you'll likely have your pick of glossy wooden tables in the handsome, blood-red dining room. It's clean, warm and classy despite the wipe-off laminated menus and industrial-grade tableware. The lighting is low and the atmosphere cozy until the noise level spikes after 10 p.m.

There are 10 pages of choices not counting desserts and wines, but it's the raw fish dishes that excel. A ceviche of corvina is a mound of sparkling fresh sea bass dotted with ringlets of purple onion, red pepper and a cool pile of cancha -- plump, roasted, nut-like corn kernels that were an Incan favorite and show up on many dishes here.

Even better is the tiradito of the same fish, slender slabs of iridescent flesh fanned out like daisy petals, each flecked with bright cilantro leaves and an ají-tinged citrus sauce. Paper-thin sheaves of just-chewy-enough octopus in a creamy purple olive sauce is a delightful surprise.

An avocado stuffed with a thick mayonnaise-based crab and potato salad with green peas that's popular in Peru's Pacific region looks as if it came straight from the pages of *Good Housekeeping*, circa 1959. While it was not bad, it was too heavy to entice anyone at our table.

Another standard, ají de gallina with long strands of hand-shredded chicken, is fabulous here with its comforting, creamy yellow sauce.

An intriguing sushi-style seaweed wrapper filled with mashed potatoes and snappy bits of shrimp and cucumber makes a luscious intro to rolls.

Parihuela, a traditional seafood soup and aphrodisiac, can easily please at least a couple and maybe a foursome as an appetizer with its huge chunks of juicy lobster, mussels, fish and langostino as big as a baby lobster.

Meat dishes are uniformly satisfying, too, including a well-seared, juicy surf and turf of tenderloin with shrimp, lobster, potatoes, cauliflower carrots and broccoli.

Another tender filet mignon won us over with its moist, pink center and crusty shell enhanced with a brown demi-glace and sautéed baby mushrooms.

The only real disappointments are the fried selections, including a heavily breaded though still flavorful calamari with a thick mayo dipping sauce.

Chica morada, a very Peruvian soft drink made with pineapple, purple corn and lemon, is here, as sweet as a glass of Kool-Aid but refreshing enough if you cut it with water.

I confess this was the first time I had knowingly ordered a Peruvian wine, and I was well pleased with an utterly drinkable \$25 Tacama gran blanco with a distinct grapefruit and pear nose and a balanced finish.

For red drinkers a deep, jammy Chilean Castillo de Molina Cabernet Reserva for a mere \$28 can stand up to bottles twice its price. A couple of dozen bargain wines (\$25-\$48) are adequate, but connoisseurs can choose from a decent reserve list with a few French, Spanish and California options priced from \$90 to \$320.

For dessert, the ever-popular suspiro de limena ("sigh of a woman of Lima") has the characteristic dulce de leche sweetness cut by cloudy puffs of marshmallowy meringue and a shake of

cinnamon. Flan is textbook with an evenly dense, cream-cheesy consistency, smothered in a smooth caramel sauce.

Place: El Gran Inka.

Address: 606 Crandon Blvd., Key Biscayne.

Rating: ***

Contact: 305-365-7883.

Hours: Noon-10 p.m. Sunday-Wednesday, until 11 p.m. Thursday-Saturday.

Prices: Appetizers \$7-\$13, entrees \$14-\$25, sides \$3, desserts \$5.

FYI: Beer and wine only. Plentiful self parking. Reservations suggested. AX, DN, MC, VS.