

San Francisco, CA

Restaurant Details

Lively, colorful Limón is like a trip to Peru

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It would be very easy to miss Limón amid the gritty hustle and bustle of Valencia Street in the heart of San Francisco's Mission District. The lime green facade and simply lettered name above the window are the only hints that an extraordinary restaurant lurks behind the little storefront.



Here, in a hip, urban setting, an enthusiastic staff serves some of the most engaging and lively food in the Bay Area. Chef Martin Castillo transforms the peppers, fish and meats of his native Peru into beautifully prepared dishes that explode with unexpected flavors. The friendly, festive spirit is so contagious, dinner feels like a party with old friends.

Since its opening nearly four years ago in a smaller storefront around the corner, Limón has built a dedicated following of foodies, hipsters and families. It's so popular that would-be diners without reservations were being turned away when a companion and I arrived around 5 p.m. on a Sunday afternoon -- the only time we could score a reservation that day.

The 100-seat restaurant is a family affair involving Martin Castillo, his brothers Antonio and Eduardo, and their mother, sister and brother-in-law. The brothers had all worked in top San Francisco restaurants before they brought their mother, Luz, from Peru to help them refine recipes and open their own place.

"All my cooking ideas and skills come from her," the chef says of his mother. Martin Castillo was a professional soccer player when he came to the United States in 1988, but he had always loved cooking with his mother and soon found himself working his way up in restaurant kitchens.

The family moved Limón to its present location nearly two years ago, more than doubling its size. The narrow, high-ceilinged dining room is striking, painted in colors of citrus and chocolate. Dramatic glass lamps hang in a row over the dark wood bar. Banquettes line the opposite wall and bare wood tables and chairs crowd the floor. Upstairs, in the small loft overlooking the action, are more tables and cushioned benches.

Smiling, cheerful waiters, dressed all in black, whisk back and forth from the bar and open kitchen with frosty mojitos and plates of ceviche. The volume of conversation, clattering pots, and laughter is cranked so high that only the thumping bass line is recognizable in the background music. Everyone seems to be having a great time.

Our waiter was a knowledgeable guide to Limón's cuisine, describing dishes in just enough detail and guiding us through a maze of unfamiliar ingredients. He helped us choose among the ceviches

-- Limón serves seven variations on raw seafood marinated in lime juice or peppers and cream -- and select a couple of cocktails. Then he considerately left us to ponder entrees.

Since the restaurant serves only beer and wine, cocktails are made with soju, a Korean beverage similar to sake, instead of vodka. It worked well with the mojito (\$8.75), heavy on lime and heady with freshly crushed mint, but fell flat on the pretty pink cosmo (\$8).

Wine choices range from German Rieslings and California mourvedre to Argentine malbec and Spanish tempranillo. Most prices hover between \$35 to \$45 a bottle and there are more than a dozen choices by the glass. Fruity sangria (\$6), with citrus slices floating in red wine, is a good choice with many dishes.

Peruvian cuisine draws its influences from Europe, Asia and the Middle East as well as the native foods of the Andes. Limón's menu reflects that diversity, with a heavy emphasis on the seafood of the coastal regions.

Ceviche is the restaurant's signature dish. Unable to pick just one, we tried a platter of four variations (\$24) and were enchanted by each. The halibut and shellfish were fresh and firm, the marinades and sauces brightly flavored. Tradition calls for "cooking" the fish in the tart acid of fresh lime juice, but Limón has created a new class of ceviche that employs cream and pepper in the marinade. The aji and rocoto peppers add spice and color while the cream mellows flavors and contributes luxurious texture. As a counterpoint, each ceviche comes with a tiny pile of sweet, crunchy Peruvian corn and a cube of soft yam.

The raw fish faces stiff competition from the calamares Limón (\$11.25), tender baby squid stuffed with an exquisite mixture of shrimp, yellow aji pepper and bread crumbs. They're served in a velvety saffron cream sauce with a tiny salad of crisp fried leeks and chopped tomatoes.

Chicharron de pollo (\$8.95), chunks of crisp, deep-fried chicken to dip into a smoky, peppery salsa, are also a good choice for a starter.

Entrees lean heavily toward meat and potatoes. Most traditional is the popular *lomo saltado* (\$17.95), chunks of top sirloin stir-fried with onions, tomatoes and french fries, of all things. It sounds odd but tastes terrific seasoned with dark, meaty sauce. *Chuleton carlitos* (\$19.25) -- an immense pork chop grilled to a golden brown and served with mushrooms and an earthy hash of bacon, cabbage and potatoes -- is a pork lover's dream.

My candidate for the most unforgettable dish, though, is the *pargo rojo* (\$24), a whole red snapper served in a dramatic basket created from the fish's skeleton, deep-fried into a sweeping arc with the tail poised high above the head. The snapper, cubed and fried until crisp, is succulent dipped into a curry sauce made with bright red rocoto peppers. It's accompanied by a pleasant coconut fried rice and a wonderful, peppery salad of the baby cabbage leaves known as *tat soi*.

Don't skip dessert. Even the familiar molten chocolate cake, known here as chocolate bandido (\$8.50), takes on a new personality at Limón, where it's served with a decadent, dusky fudge sauce, blueberry compote and dulce de leche ice cream. Flan (\$7.75), accented with a touch of the lightly woody Peruvian brandy known as pisco, bursts with citrus flavor from the soft orange sorbet and slices of blood orange.

Food is never dull at Limón.

Limón: 524 Valencia St., near 16th, San Francisco (415) 252-0918. www.limon-sf.com

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The Dish: Dinner feels like a party with old friends in this hip, urban restaurant, where Chef Martin Castillo transforms the ingredients of his native Peru into beautifully prepared dishes that explode with unexpected flavors.

Price range: Lunch \$11.95-\$13.95. Dinner appetizers \$6.50-\$13.95, entrees \$14.25-\$24. Corkage fee: \$15.

Details: Beer and wine. Public parking garage nearby at 16th and Hoff.

Pluses: Brightly flavored ceviches and dramatic whole red snapper.

Minuses: Extremely noisy dining room.

Hours: Lunch 11:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Mondays-Fridays. Dinner 5-10:30 p.m. Mondays-Thursday, 5-11 p.m. Fridays. Noon-11 p.m. Saturdays. Noon-10 p.m. Sundays.

Restaurant reviews are conducted anonymously. The Mercury News pays for all meals.

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