

It's pan-Latin cuisine is hit or miss, but the cocktails pack a punch.

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Festive Bocanova Lights Up Jack London Square



Article

Jack London Square is a primary player in Oakland's aborning culinary renaissance. After several years of decay and stagnation, the old waterfront is reinventing itself with new businesses, open-air markets, the timeless attractions of ferryboat and waterscape, and a promising array of new and upcoming restaurants: Miss Pearl's, Chop Bar, Bracina, and Tanya Holland's new Creole venue among them. Bocanova, which opened in early September, is a prominent and attractive example. It's the brainchild of Rick Hackett and Meredith Melville, whose previous credits include the kitchens and dining rooms (respectively) of Chez Panisse, Bay Wolf, and Enrico's. At their new venue the emphasis is on the bright, soulful cuisines of Latin America with a few leavening Northern California accents thrown in. The setting is a beautifully remodeled 1920s ice house, an airy, high-ceilinged industrial-chic rendezvous in blown glass, earth tones, and draped concrete. Communal tables, an open kitchen, intricate tilework, and random folklorico create a festive, friendly ambience, and floor-to-ceiling windows offer lovely views of the square and the estuary beyond.

The totally à la carte menu is made up of three dozen large and small plates in nine different appliance-centric categories ("from the grill," "from the stove," and so on), a setup that allows you and your dining companions to pick and choose from an array of proteins, veggies, and starches. "From the pantry" came rich, buttery Peruvian black olives and spiced roasted peanuts that were light on the spice and stale to boot. The raw bar's Veracruz-style albacore crudo, on the other hand, was absolutely fresh and tasty, with onion, peppers, and citrus accenting the tuna's clean, crisp flavor. Out of the freidora (fryer) came a couple of pretty good empanadas made with too much dough and not enough of the advertised corn kernels and forest mushrooms, but the stove produced a platter of surprisingly addictive "burnt carrots," big chunks of the lush and earthy with a hint of cilantro accenting all that slow-cooked sweetness.

Another root-vegetable extravaganza, sweet potato gratin "from the oven," was one of the evening's best dishes, a rich, hearty ramekin's worth of tuber, spice, and cream with just enough chipotle pepper to leave a nice warm afterglow. Sea of Cortez scallops fresh from the plancha (griddle) were equally irresistible; sweet, juicy, and succulent, with an edge of smoke and brine, they were drizzled with a subtly peppery curry coulis that didn't detract from the seafood. The grill offered two classic dishes ideally suited to Bocanova's bayside patio. Ears of fresh white Brentwood corn were grilled until sweet and juicy and then drizzled with lime juice and melted butter, and if you love corn on the cob, that's really all you need to know. Burgers, corn's perfect backyard-barbecue companion, were available as sliders made from top-grade Prather Ranch beef — three smoky little mouthfuls cooked to a perfect medium rare and dressed with a spiky Venezuelan avocado salsa. Another warm-weather classic, pork ribs, wasn't as successful. Perfectly prepared to the moist and tender stage, these lean and meaty pig bones were practically tasteless, proof that a little fat here and there isn't all bad.

Desserts are a mixed bag, starting with something called Flan in a Bag, a thick, gummy bastardization of the classic egg custard, served oozing in a sack with an overabundance of sugar syrup. Leche fritas (fried milk) was a better dairy-dessert option, a surprisingly feathery, not-too-sweet custard with a light and crunchy coating. Best of all, though, was the chocolate croissant bread pudding. Rich, buttery, and luscious, it was as irresistibly comforting as New Orleans' finest, especially with a healthy dollop of cinnamon-edged Mexican chocolate ice cream melting on top.

The restaurant features plenty of options for the vegetarian diner. Meat-free pantry snacks include housemade tortilla chips with two kinds of salsa as well as the roasted peanuts and Peruvian olives. Salads of frisee, radish, and grapefruit and of avocado, endive, and hearts of palm are available from the garden. The fryer serves up padrone peppers with pink sea salt, yucca with garlic butter and cilantro, and fried potatoes with Peruvian tapenade as well as the corn-mushroom empanadas. There also are pole beans with tomatoes and garlic from the stove, roasted beets with avocado vinaigrette from the oven, zucchini with gypsy pepper sofrito from the grill, and the burnt carrots with cilantro, the sweet potato-chipotle gratin, and the grilled corn with lime butter.

Bocanova's hundred-item wine list is almost as pan-American as its cuisine, offering bottles out of Chile, Argentina, California, and the Northwest as well as Portugal and Spain. Several come from seldom-encountered boutique vineyards with a proclivity for organic and sustainable farming, and are well worth investigating. Twenty-one selections are available by the glass or carafe.

Like any new upscale eatery worth its swizzle stick, the restaurant also offers a wide array of house cocktails. Our favorite was the Dill-icious, a tall cool glass of tequila, lime, cucumber, and fresh dill — a brisk and herbaceous warm-weather libation. The equally horticultural house gimlet supplemented the gin and lime juice with muddled basil to excellent effect. The Voluptuous cocktail's egg white, agave nectar, absinthe, and crushed strawberries made for an overly sweet and frothy concoction, but the pisco punch was a delight: lime, orange, and pineapple, cloves, anise, and cinnamon, ginger beer and the high-octane Peruvian brandy of the title, all mixed together into an absolutely refreshing mood-enhancer with a cornucopia of flavors to recommend it. Not unlike Latin America itself.