

## DINING

## Visit Zafra to learn the glories of Latin American food

By S&amp;M Kilnisan

Journal restaurant reviewers

**A**t Zafra, a new Cuban Latino restaurant in Hoboken, the owners are fanatical about food. And that bodes well for the passionate as well as for the pedestrian.

For Zafra is not only a unique eatery where you can sample Latin American cuisine at its most authentic and delicious. It is also a homey cafe where a cup of Cuban espresso or Venezuelan hot chocolate can take the chill off a wintry morning.

Loving a challenge, the owners have transformed what up until three months ago was an aging, run-of-the-mill lunch spot into a stylish cafe where a festive yet discerning design sense is at work. Awash with colors, the small rectangular eating area sports a sleek copper-sheeted dining counter. Hurricane lamps hang above. Along the wall, cafe tables draped in tablecloths of tropical floral prints offer a more formal setup. Although seating is limited to 30, Zafra's small space is used creatively and wisely. One never feels elbow-to-elbow claustrophobic.

Antiques and objets d'art are cleverly placed throughout the cafe. A vibrantly colored length of framed stained glass, evocative of Havana's colonial architecture, dominates the tiled wall behind the counter; on the far wall hang antique utensils: a copper pot and wooden trough.

Displayed in the front window is an imposing wooden mortar and pestle, along with a profusion of plants and books. Yes, books. This is one restaurant where you're encouraged to eat and read, for the management isn't averse to lingering diners. In fact, it's easy to imagine Zafra as the kind of place where customers become part of an extended family. Here you can enjoy three squares, seven days a

The management is as intriguing as the pan-Latin menu. The owners are a trio of friends, whose experience runs the gamut from restaurant manager and chef to food historian and food writer.

Clara Chaumont serves as general manager and hostess. Leonardo de La Sierra, Zafra's chef from Uruguay, shares kitchen duties with Maricel Presilla, a food historian and writer whose works have appeared in *Saveur* magazine. Scribners will publish Presilla's cookbook cum cultural history, "The Classic Foods of Latin America" in 2001. Undertaken over the past three years, Presilla's research for the collection has brought her to much of Latin America. Indeed some aspects of her research are to be found in Zafra's kitchen (for example, the discriminating use of chili peppers) and, certainly, many of the recipes have premiered on Zafra's tables.

Now on to the food: If you've yet to experience the delights of the Latin American table, a few visits here will serve as an excellent and satisfying primer. Consider the menu as a gastronomic travelogue. The diversity of offerings is akin to a whirlwind trip to the Southern Hemisphere and cheaper than a round trip ticket. Imagine journeying from Argentina's Buenos Aires to Cuba's Havana on a Saturday night, minus the jet lag and visa.

Argentine steak (*churrasco*), Uruguayan salad, Brazilian kale, Peruvian cebiche, Dominican pumpkin soup, Oaxacan enchiladas, Costa Rican wine (non-alcoholic) and Cuban medianoche. All this and more can be had for surprisingly reasonable prices. Appetizers range from \$1.75 to \$4, sandwiches from \$3.50 to \$6 and entrees from \$7 to \$14.

Sampling a variety of dishes, we were impressed by the quality of ingredients, the complexity

**Zafra**

301 Willow Ave., Hoboken  
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Open Monday through Thursday from 7 a.m. to 9:30 p.m.; Friday from 7 a.m. to 11:30 p.m.; Saturday from 8 a.m. to 11:30 p.m.; Sunday from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. Breakfast, lunch and dinner served Monday through Friday. Brunch and dinner served Saturday and Sunday. Major credit cards accepted. Reservations recommended on weekends. B.Y.O.B.

tive presentation. Zafra prides itself on the home-style taste of its cuisine and the lengths to which the kitchen will go to achieve it. Its repertoire of chilies is breathtaking - sometimes literally. The connoisseur will find the common place such as Mexican jalapenos and chipotles with the exotic such as aji panca, Andean peppers or aji dulce, Caribbean chilies.

Rich in flavor, the Cuban corn tamal was prepared from fresh corn rather than corn meal

(\$3.50). The Brazilian kale, available as a side dish, was so finely shredded that its long-green ribbons were nearly too artistic to eat. But our appetites prevailed and were satisfied with a deliciously crunchy helping of it sautéed in garlic (\$2.50).

The Puerto Rican pastel, a tamal made from green bananas (plantains) and filled with olives and whole chickpeas, had a smooth dense texture. Its salsa was aromatic, with a spicy edge (\$4). Other recommendations for appetizers include: a delicious *papa rellena* (\$2) — a golden ball of mashed potatoes filled with a piquant meat sauce; perfectly fried ham croquettes (\$2.50); and crispy yuca fries (\$3).

A Caribbean classic, the chicken soup was prepared home-style, thick with chunks of carrots, potatoes, and strands of cut pasta. Don't be surprised by the occasional chicken bone or bay leaf. This soup is the real thing (\$2.50).

In addition to the kale, other sides include black beans, prepared with meat or vegetarian style, and golden, candy-sweet, fried bananas (*platanos maduros*).

The *maduros* are an obligatory accompaniment to such dishes as *ropa vieja*, a traditional Cuban beef dish. Served on a bale of yuca chips and threaded with strips of red and green peppers and onions, the long strands of beef are braised in white wine (\$7). For lighter fare, try the shrimp in red sauce (*camarones coloraditos*). Four jumbo shrimp were sautéed in a thick, brick red sauce, spiced with ancho and served atop sweetly flavored, corn tamal (\$14). Three to a serving, the chicken *enchiladas* were stuffed with tender grilled chicken and served with refried beans, which had been flavored with avocado leaves (\$7).

Desserts are the ultimate in comfort food and range from a perfectly prepared flan (\$2) to a warm rice pudding (\$2.25).

Note: Zafra has a B.Y.O.B policy that extends beyond beer and wine. If you bring your own liquor, a variety of Latin cocktails can be prepared: margarita, daiquiri, mojito (a rum and lime spritzer flavored with yerbabueno, a type of spearmint), sangria, and a Chilean *isco-pisco* sour.