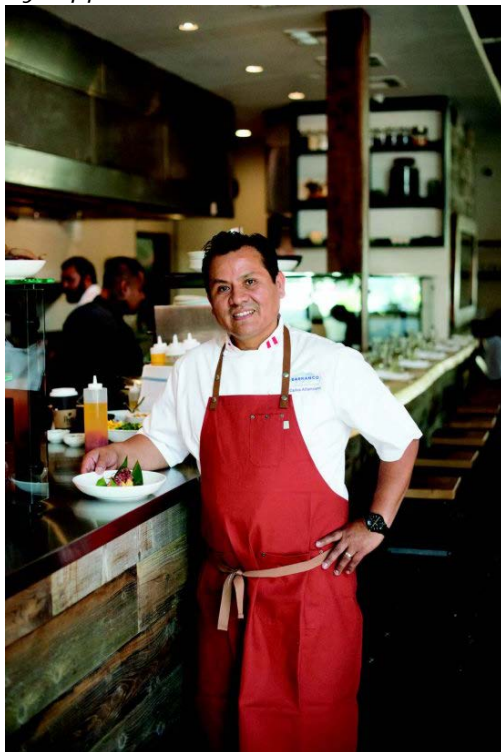


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Barranco finds a niche in Lafayette

By Pippa Fisher



Chef-Owner Carlos Altamirano is all smiles at his new restaurant. Photos Kristen Loken

Despite an abundance of dining choices available in Lafayette, the latest addition to "restaurant row" is generating quite a buzz. And it is not surprising. Named for the chef's hometown in Lima, Peru, Barranco specializes in fresh seafood.

Michelin-recognized Chef-Owner Carlos Altamirano says that he is committed to cooking with only the finest and freshest ingredients and in preserving the integrity of Peru's most treasured dishes, adding his own flair.

Altamirano opened Barranco, his seventh Peruvian restaurant in the Bay Area and his third in the East Bay, on Sept. 15 in the space that used to be Baja Fresh.

The extensive remodel, designed by Crome Architecture, is modern and simple with high ceilings and a concrete floor. The tables are packed in tightly and when entering on a Friday evening only a week after opening, the restaurant was bustling and full. The space is warm and lively - there are several custom murals by Bay Area artists Letty Samonte and Bridget Moser, and an open kitchen area. There is a spacious corner patio so diners can enjoy watching the world go by outside.

To the side of the main restaurant is a bar area under the supervision of bar manager Arthur Valderrama. With an extensive cocktail list featuring pisco, the traditional spirit of Peru, many of the concoctions are made with produce found throughout South America such as mango, pineapple and passion fruit.

Inside it is undeniably loud but this adds to the energy and vibe of the restaurant.

"Barranco embodies the elegant bohemian, lively and cheerful spirit of my favorite city in Peru," says Altamirano. "I could not be more excited to share the incredible cuisine and culture of Barranco with the people of Lafayette."

We were seated promptly and received attentive and cheerful service for the duration of our meal from our knowledgeable server who was only too happy to answer any questions we had about the menu.

The impressive array of cocktails made it hard to decide which to try but having decided on "traditional," the pisco sour was delicious. There is also a selection of Californian and South American wines and several microbrews on tap.

The menu itself features Altamirano's hallmark cebiche, grilled anticuchos (meat skewers), chicharrones, bocaditos (small bites) such as pulpo a la parilla (twice cooked Spanish octopus) and empanadas for starters.

Again, going for "traditional" we selected the cebiche tasting to share, which looked almost too pretty to eat. The flavors were piquant and had a kick but did not overwhelm the seafood. It was very fresh and clean-tasting, reflecting Altamirano's reputation for creating dishes with high quality and responsibly sourced ingredients. All ingredients are fresh and are supplied from well-respected local farms or farmers' markets.

The list of main courses such as seafood paella and langostinos crocantes (prawns) is varied but still with an emphasis on seafood and can be served with an assortment of delectable sides. Prices range from \$19 for a vegetable risotto to \$39 for steak.

For main courses we sampled both the paella negra - Peruvian style squid ink seafood paella and the salmon bandido. The paella came with traditional bomba rice and a saffron-paprika base in Peruvian beer. The dish was substantial and hearty.

The salmon was grilled with locro-pumpkin stew and escabeche. The texture and flavor of the traditional Peruvian stew was smooth and close to perfection. Both main courses were generous in size without being overwhelming.

For those with room for dessert there is flan, chocolate flourless cake and alfajores, the popular Latin-American artisanal cookies as well as a selection of dessert wines.

Purely in the interest of this review, you understand, we managed to sample the chocolate cake and flan, which made an indulgent, if not strictly necessary, end to the evening.

Altamirano has managed to keep the flavors authentic, rather than to compromise by adapting them to American taste buds and this is perhaps what sets his restaurants apart.

This is a fun, lively addition to Lafayette. It is a great place to meet friends and enjoy fresh and authentic Peruvian food.

Barranco, located at 3596 Mount Diablo Boulevard in Lafayette, is open Tuesday through Thursday and Sunday from 5 to 9 p.m., and Friday and Saturday from 5 to 10 p.m. Lunch is served from 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m.



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