Is Walnut Creek's LITA the hottest new restaurant in the East Bay?



LITA, from a longtime Walnut Creek restaurant family, has brought its Latin-Caribbean food and vibe to Walnut Creek. (Ray Chavez/Bay Area News Group)

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Give me guava ceviche, clarified milk rum punch and all the gold interiors, without flying to Florida.

That's LITA, a new Miami-inspired restaurant opening today in downtown Walnut Creek and already booked for dinner through the weekend. Located at 1602 Bonanza St., LITA has been in the works for two years and brings together veteran talent from San Francisco, Oakland, Miami and Mexico. Owner Ghaben Partners, the restaurant family behind neighboring Broderick Roadhouse, has managed to create a one-of-a-kind spot that fuses modern Cuban and Jamaican dishes with Miami vibes and still feels like the Bay Area.

LITA is a showstopper, and those can sometimes make me weary, especially when they're backed by investors who know little about running restaurants. But the Ghaben cousins have been running restaurants in and around Walnut Creek since the 1980s, including The Original Mels Diner, which closed in August after 20 years but will soon be the home of a hot fried chicken concept from a next-generation Ghaben.





Black pepper jumbo shrimp is one of the menu items served at the LITA restaurant in Walnut Creek, Calif., on Wednesday, Jan. 19, 2022. The restaurant features Caribbean and Latin-American food. (Ray Chavez/Bay Area News Group)

They "just really love Walnut Creek," co-owner Rolla Ghaben told me at last night's preview, and felt "the city really needed something like LITA." From their Lafayette restaurant, Batch & Brine, they brought over executive chef Nick Peters to run the kitchen, which serviced the bustling crowd with clipped, confident speed, as if floating homemade mint syrup pearls into mojitos or turning poached Maine lobster into corn dogs (it's a Miami thing) is something they've done for years.

When you walk into LITA, everything is brightly lit, like an iPhone filter, from the marbled bar to the custom infinity mirror by Orange County artist Nicky Alice. Purple-ish patched booths and bar stools are meant to emulate Miami sunsets, but in my view they provide a bright juxtaposition to the concrete faux walls, which were hand sculpted by Miami-based Colombian artist Lorna Samara Ash. The gold accents are just right.





So is the food. It's astonishly good. The dinner menu is divided into starters, ceviches, tacos and empanadas, larger plates and family-style specials. Each has just a few options, all made using locally-sourced ingredients whenever possible. Roasted pineapple and Fresno chiles give layers of sweet heat to crispy, coconut-braised pork belly held in a soft, housemade blue corn tortilla (\$11). Fresh, buttery kampachi is marinated in guava and coconut milk, with cucumber and jicama for crunch (\$20).

And the Ancho Chile Coffee Short Ribs (\$30) are just as tempting as the shareable Jerk-Marinated Half Ventura Heirloom Chicken (\$27), and its vegetarian bowl counterpart, brimming with jerk maitake mushrooms, Caribbean slaw, Scott-Bonnet tomatoes and coconut rice (\$18).



Bartender Noel Morales makes pair of signature cocktails, Chickcharnee, left, and Isla de Tigre, at LITA restaurant in Walnut Creek. They are two of the 10 craft cocktails available at LITA. (Ray Chavez/Bay Area News Group)

LITA's cocktail program is equally impressive. Curated by bar consultant Alex Arriaga, who brings experience from Lafayette's Barranco and Emeryville's Trader Vic's, the 10 craft cocktails are spirit-forward without being boozy. The dreamy St. Croix Crystal Milk Punch (\$15), which comes with an edible flower popsicle, is made by soaking three types of rum with baking spices, citrus rinds and pineapple and using a technique called milk clarification to make the drink clear as crystal, and way too drinkable.

Seriously, just go.

LITA is open for lunch and dinner from 11:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday-Thursday and until 10 p.m. Friday and Saturday. The restaurant closes at 8 p.m. Sundays; www.litawalnutcreek.com.

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