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POCA MADRE



If you want to chart how far this Mexican hideaway has traveled since it opened, ask for the charred cabbage. Singed leaves might not sound like a game-changer, but they sure taste like one when they're arranged with spoonfuls of shredded oxtail "jam" on a pale green, heat-packing mole that fairly pulses with cilantro, mint and ground seeds. My point: Vegetables are getting starring roles, and meat is being used more like a garnish. Indeed, one of the most enticing ceviches here revolves around mango compressed with chiles and lime and finished with candied Fresno pepper and dark splotches of charred habanero oil, an accent chef-owner Victor Albisu likes so much he says, "I put it on everything," even eggs at breakfast.

The chef has a playful side. "Everything" infladita stuffs smoked

whitefish in delicate fried tortilla cups, and panko-crisped halibut gets slipped between a steamed bun slathered with chipotle cream. It's a Filet-O-Fish, *sí*, but superior in every way to the one at McDonald's. If there's one dish Albisu says he can't take off the list, it's fried chicken set on a much-improved black mole enriched with foie gras. All the dish needs is a sparkling salad to counter the decadence, and that it gets, along with excellent blue corn tortillas.

Has it been a while since your last visit to the moody dining room? Never tried the restaurant, whose service keeps pace with the kitchen? You're missing out. Poca Madre is at the top of its game. ● 777 1 St. NW. 202-838-5300. pocamadrec.com. Dinner daily. Small plates \$12-\$32, large sharing plates \$46-\$110. **Sound check:** 70 decibels / Conversation is easy.

The "everything" infladitas at Poca Madre feature fried tortilla cups filled with smoked whitefish and topped with trout roe.

PHOTO: DEB LINDSEY