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FLAIR AND FLAVOR STARTING AT TOP: PINA MEZCALITA (COCKTAIL), AMARILLO CEVICHE, COLORADO BISON FILET ANTICUCHO, PISCO NATILLA, CUSCO HALF-CHICKEN, CASUAL ENCOUNTER (COCKTAIL).

Flavor and finesse

STEP IN FROM THE CHILLY AIR AND THAW OUT IN THE WARMTH OF **TORO LATIN KITCHEN AND LOUNGE**. BY ERICA BUEHLER

The newest addition to downtown Cherry Creek, Toro Latin Kitchen welcomes you with the promise of comfort and contentment in every way. In a space marked by a simultaneous coziness and wide-open grandeur, it's easy to settle in and get comfortable here. Rich leather accents complement soaring ceilings and the grand dining room is tastefully ornamented in Southwestern and South American décor. An expansive outdoor patio for open-air dining sits under strung lights and adds to the air of south-of-the-equator opulence.

Now, as someone who hadn't yet had the pleasure of trying authentic Latin American food, I was excited and curious to sample the fresh flavors of Toro. Of course, knowing Toro is a Richard Sandoval concept, I knew I was in for a treat. Still, it was an absolute delight to dine in the relaxed and inviting atmosphere and at the dedicated hands of Chef Oscar Padilla and the Toro staff. "Most people, when they think of Latin American food, they think of nachos and burritos," says Chef Padilla. "But Latin American food comes from Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, Peru, it's so different."

Even before getting to the downright delicious drinks, we were served with a palate-freshening tea of ginger, lime, granulated sugar, and hibiscus flower. Light and floral, it was a lovely start to the evening. For cocktails, it was a must that we experience the showmanship and craft of the Casual Encounter. The drink, with its makeup of Laws Four Grain bourbon, Cocchi Americano, Drambuie, and orange bitters arrives by way of a Fortessa Chamber of Hickory Smoke, drifting out as the door is opened and the cocktail is placed before you. If you love presentation (and good bourbon), this is for you.

Also dazzling us drink-wise was the Piña Mezcalita (El Silencio Espadin mezcal, Ancho Reyes, agave nectar, lime, pineapple,

Sal de Gusano), a take on a deconstructed piña colada, which was as tasty and refreshingly spicy as it sounds.

Unsurprisingly, fresh and flavorful are understatements when it comes to Toro's main offerings. A serious Latin American show of fresh fish, meats, herbs, and spices, (most of which are local, by the way) Toro fits in snugly with the refined and lavish tastes of Cherry Creek. "We try to bring people the authentic flavors of Latin America," says Chef Oscar Padilla. "We currently have ingredients being sent to us (from Latin America), so we can recreate that freshness."

Of course, the Ceviche was number one on our must-have starter list. I was delighted to try the Amarillo Ceviche, a beautiful, bright-yellow display of hamachi, aji amarillo, a tantalizing and citrusy leche de tigre, and slices of mango, cucumber, and red onion. Totally tangy and refreshing, it was everything we expected and more, given the buzzing reputation of Toro's ceviche menu.

The Colorado Bison Filet Anticucho was another starter plate that impressed. A staple Peruvian dish, the skewers of tender Colorado bison in an aji adobo marinade were complemented elegantly by baby arugula, charred corn salad, and a light and creamy dipping sauce.

For mains, enter: the decadent Cusco Half Chicken as well as the Salmon, both cooked to tender, juicy perfection and expertly plated. The chicken, achiote-marinated and atop a bed of luscious mashed potatoes comes served with roasted broccolini, criolla salsa, and a

charred lemon for an extra zing. And the equally delicious salmon (also marinated in an achiote paste) is a work of art comprising dashi-braised bok choy, cauliflower purée, bacon morita chile jam, and achiote ponzu.

Capping off a blissful evening was none other than Toro's Pisco Natilla. A dreamy custard topped with fresh berries, bread crumbs, and an aji amarillo coulis sauce, it was the perfect end to an evening marked by adroit cooking and Latin American flair. **OLM**



PASSION'S IN THE RECIPE DEDICATED CHEF OSCAR PADILLA ELEGANTLY PLATES SOME CEVICHE.

 **TORO LATIN KITCHEN & LOUNGE** | 150 Clayton Lane | torodenver.com