

"XIOMARA'S MAMBO" MAY BE THE SINGLE most seductive drink in all of Southern California. The crowds who never stray from Colorado Boulevard in Old Town Pasadena don't know what they're missing, but fans of Xiomara's cooking do. You won't find this mojito anywhere else: that's why owner Xiomara Ardolina gave it this nickname. The secret is the honeyed taste of the fresh sugar cane juice she uses in place of sugar. Combined with bruised mint leaves, fresh lime juice, a jolt of light rum and a dash of soda water for sparkle, the sugar cane juice gives this mojito a haunting depth of flavor.

I recommend at least one Mambo to ease into the tropical rhythm of Xiomara's high-spirited Nuevo Latino food. Sipping this cool, long drink between bites of tropical appetizers, the annoyances of the day recede. Life seems sweeter.

To start, Ardolina might send out a complimentary slice of Spanish tortilla. Closer to an Italian frittata than a Mexican tortilla, it's essentially a layered omelet laced with potatoes and diced chorizo.

The best strategy here is to order a slew of appetizers for the table. The ceviche, served in a tall martini glass, is a must. A particularly juicy version, it's a mix of shrimp and scallops in a tart three-citrus marinade spiked with sweet onions, tomatoes, ripe avocado and plenty of cilantro. I can never resist the Nuevo Cubano salad either.

Ardolina has put together tastes of yellow and red heirloom tomatoes, rich, oily avocado, crunchy hearts of palm and watercress perfumed with orange.

Black bean soup is one of the glories of Cuban cuisine, and this "Very Cuban Black Bean Soup" does it justice. Velvety in texture, a deep bluish black in color, it is lightly perfumed with cumin and cooked without any stock, so the taste is predominantly inky black beans. I like to order it spicy, punctuated with a slow, smoldering heat. Another excellent starter is the fluffy Cuban seafood tamale, studded with Florida rock shrimp in a svelte chanterelle mushroom salsa. Or the duck ropa vieja, a play on the traditional beef cooked until it falls into shreds, hence the name, which means "old clothes."

Sipping my mojito, I imagine some poor soul walking into Xiomara, looking forward to the lamb daube he enjoyed a few years ago, when the menu was French bistro fare. The mirrored and brick walls, the black leather-upholstered chairs, the lavish arrangement of lilies or orchids are the same. But most everything else has changed. The music has gone Cuban--Beny More, Albita and the Buena Vista Social Club-- and Ardolina has adopted a guayabera shirt worn as a form-fitting dress.

While that grandmotherly lamb daube is no longer on the menu, there's a spicy lamb shank cooked in the same cast iron pot sealed with a flour-and-water crust to hold in all the fragrance. The meat is falling-off-the-bone tender, moist and flavorful, served with pearl onions and vegetables and, instead of noodles or mashed potatoes, mashed taro root. Why long for boring steak frites when that poor soul could dig into a chewy churrasco (Nicaraguan-style skirt steak) with huitlacoche (Mexican corn fungus) and mashed potatoes spiked with the great Spanish blue cheese, Cabrales? Or devour a calle ocho, Cuban-style marinated sirloin garnished with avocado, red onions and parsley, and a pile of yuca fries? And who could be disappointed that instead of bouillabaisse, there's chupe, a robust seafood stew overflowing with scallops, mussels, shrimp and squid and punched up with a Peruvian aji amarillo (chile sauce)?

How did a French bistro segue into a Nuevo Latino restaurant anyway? Under chef Patrick Healy, Xiomara was doing French bistro before the bistro craze. But Ardolina longed for the tastes of home--and excited by the new Latin cooking she tasted on trips to Little Havana and New York--she opened the back room as a second restaurant, a Cuban-inspired supper club. When Healy left in 1998 (he's now the chef at Buffalo Club in Santa Monica), she decided to devote her entire menu to the vibrant flavors of Nuevo Latino and Asian-Cuban cooking. In the interim, chefs have come and gone. Ardolina is acting as executive chef for now, and things are perking along just fine.

She's best at Latin-inflected comfort food. Tops in that category is the Chino-Cubano fried rice, an insidiously delicious mixture of fried rice with sweet little rock shrimp, avocado and plantain. Salmon takes on a new dimension when it gets a Chinese-style sweet glaze and is paired with the South American grain quinoa, cooked Spanish rice-style.

Though the towering pork hash doesn't look too unappetizing, it's actually a honey of a dish--a huge pile of shredded pork marinated in mojo

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criollo (Creole marinade) and sour orange juice set off nicely by a sober black bean sauce. Occasionally the dish can be too salty.

The well-trained staff knows the food inside and out and notes just the moment when you'll need that next mojito. Xiomara's wine list was originally created for French bistro food, but now includes a nice selection of interesting wines from Chile, Argentina, Spain, even South Africa and Mexico, and is divided into Old and New World selections. Who's to say Pinot Noir doesn't go with tropical flavors? You be the judge.

Also, probably because Cafe Bizou down the block offers the lure of a \$2 corkage fee, Xiomara's menu notes that "should you prefer to bring your own special bottle of wine, there will be no corkage fee." Touche. But please make sure it's a very good bottle.

Desserts aren't Xiomara's strong suit. They include an extra-large coconut creme brulee, a frozen key lime souffle that's so frozen the fork bounces off it, and the coffee-flavored tres leches cake made with three kinds of milk. The best is the special chocolate bread pudding souffle. It's a bowl of steaming dark chocolate, soft and tender. The waiter cuts into the top and pours in coffee cream sauce from a little silver pitcher. This is a dessert to be shared--as is most of the food at Xiomara.

Bistros are everywhere. That's why if I had to choose between the original Xiomara and its Nuevo Latino successor, I'd vote for the latter. Not that those mojitos are influencing me--much.

Xiomara
69 N. Raymond Ave.,
Pasadena,
(626) 796-2520
Cuisine: Nuevo Latino
Rating: **
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AMBIENCE: Vibrant Nuevo Latino food in a smart bistro atmosphere in Old Pasadena; private dining room for parties. **SERVICE:** Warm and professional. **BEST DISHES:** Black bean soup, Nuevo Cubano salad, ceviche, Cuban-style tamale, seafood chupe, seared pork hash, spicy lamb shank, churrasco. Corkage complimentary. **DRINK PICKS:** Xiomara's Mambo, 1994 San Vicente Rioja, Spain. **FACTS:** Dinner appetizers, \$8 to \$13. Main courses, \$15 to \$26. Dinner daily, lunch weekdays. Valet parking. Rating is based on food, service and ambience, with price taken into account in relation to quality. ******:** Outstanding on every level. *****:** Excellent. ****:** Very good. *****: Good. No star: Poor to satisfactory.

