

# Cucharamama offers unique, upscale South American food

By S&M Kilnisan

Journal restaurant reviewers

‘Cucha what?’

Although the name of this new eatery is a mouthful, Cucharamama has been on the lips of local foodies since its opening in Hoboken last April.

Among area restaurants, dare we say even some New York ones, this new enterprise, co-owned by Maricel Presilla and Clara Chaumont, is unique.

Six days a week on the corner of Clinton and Third Streets, the industrious duo eloquently translates South American food into an upscale cuisine worthy of a new world.

Short of booking a multi-country tour to the Amazon and the Andes, dining here is one of

the latter are referred to as piqueo. Varied and abundant, they are the South American version of tapas and could easily form an entire meal.

But what about that name? Cucharamama translates as “mother spoon.” Think of it as the big spoon that stirs the pot and keeps everyone well fed and happy.

Chef-owner Maricel Presilla first introduced Hoboken to the wonders of the Latin table at Zafra, a tiny café she and her partner opened four years ago. Compared to its older sibling, Cucharamama has a luxe feel expressed in a sophisticated ambience, accented with exotic, colorful folk art.

The dining room’s piece de resistance is an adobe oven that is fired with hickory, apple and cherry wood. In full view of diners, it yields fascinating and delicious meals, ranging from an unusual trio of pizzas (try the spicy pizza Araucana topped with organic eggs and bacon and panca pepper salsa) to whole fish.

We’ve yet to see a roast suckling pig emerge from the oven’s wood-fueled flames. That, unfortunately, is a special order. However, the tantalizing empanadas are not. Moist and memorable, they’re filled with either beef or Spanish cabrales blue cheese. (\$7) While you’re at it, don’t pass up the Peruvian-style quail marinated in an unusual aji chili sauce (\$9).

The menu specializes in artisanal South American cooking, which means lots of fresh ingredients are used in dishes cooked from scratch and anchored in authenticity. Presilla concedes that the approach is time consuming, but then again she’s not interested in short cuts.

Bottom line for the diner: be prepared to wait. Not that that should be a problem, considering all the fabulous cocktails waiting



Journal photo by Andrew McKoy

**MARICEL PRESILLA**, left, and Clara Chaumont, both owners of the Cucharamama Restaurant in Hoboken, stand in front of the brick oven.

to be drunk. Take your pick from an exuberant array that includes Pisco sours, almond-flavored Horchatas with Guatemalan rum, and “mamapolitans,” which unlike cosmos are made with hibiscus rather than cranberry juice.

The cocktail selection should help you brave the culinary exotica that awaits, and which, depending on your mindset, may throw you for a loop. As Presilla wisely notes, “At Cucharamama you can’t revert to what you know.” And she calls it right. When was the last time you had the Peruvian specialty, tamale con seco de pato (a delicately flavored corn tamale with braised duck) or enjoyed the simple, earthy pleasures of pata de chanco al estilo de Tacna (a roast leg of pork seasoned in adobo sauce of Andean chilies). We lay odds on never.

But fear not. Navigating the new is doable, thanks to a well-organized menu that groups dishes by families. Starters are referred to as piqueo — a Peruvian term for a buffet that precedes a banquet. The word is

an apt one, considering the more than 40 starters, including side dishes, from which to choose. Appetizers and side dishes range from \$6 to \$14; entrees from \$12 to \$25.

Among the piqueos are Andean-style kabobs, ceviches, soups, tamales, pizzas, potato, vegetable and quinoa dishes galore and specialties from the wood-burning oven. Recommendations include the savory Argentine sausages served with roasted peppers and onions (\$12), as well the South American style pizzas. Beware the pizza with salt cod. It may be too salty for some palates.

Other must-tries include the crunchy Peruvian-style fried calamari served with a tantalizing sauce of spicy Incan peppers (\$8), the fried quinoa-crust chicken fingers (\$8) and any of the five varieties of tamales, many of which are made from fresh corn (\$7 to \$9).

Vegetarians will find slim pickings, save for the daily fish special and a spicy shrimp dish in a sauce of potatoes and onions (\$19).

## Cucharamama

233 Clinton St., Hoboken, 201-420-1700

Reservations highly recommended  
Credit cards: Visa, MasterCard, Amex  
Hours: Open for dinner from 5:00 to 10:30 pm Tuesday through Sunday. Closed Mondays.

the best ways to enjoy the bounty of South America’s expressive cooking styles. Peruvian, Chilean, Ecuadorian, Bolivian, Brazilian, Colombian, Argentine. They’re all represented in an exciting menu that surprises and delights the uninformed palate. The heavy lifting is equally shared by entrees and appetizers. At Cucharamama,