

DINING

Variations on a theme

Ceviche gives chefs a canvas for creativity

By Kevin Pang

Tribune staff reporter

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Ceviche has become the canvas on which local chefs are expressing their culinary creativity, pushing the boundaries of its definition--fresh seafood marinated and "cooked" with the citric acid in citrus juice.

Now, ceviches prepared with green apple, vanilla or watermelon are not uncommon, and have helped this Latin American specialty cross the threshold into food chic.

Three dishes all named ceviche can appear in three different forms at three restaurants. At River North's Nacional 27, a farmed bass ceviche is prepared with grapefruit, serrano chiles and pumpkin seeds. A trio of ceviches at Topolobampo/Frontera Grill on Clark Street highlights regional Mexican ingredients, substituting jicama for onion in some versions. At Rogers Park's Taste of Peru, a ceviche especial of octopus, calamari, shrimp, mussels, scallops and grouper in lime juice arrives with pickled red onions and a side of potatoes, corn and yam.

That the dish (typically served as a starter course) is generally low in fat and high in protein is one factor in growing popularity of ceviche. The ebbing resistance to raw fish, thanks in part to sushi's recent popularity, is likely another.

"Within the last five to eight years, ceviche has really taken off," said Brian Enyart, managing chef at Topolobampo/Frontera Grill. "I got here 10 years ago, and ceviche was cool, but ceviche was still raw fish. Now people are going to ceviche bars, writing ceviche books."

Fueling this ceviche surge is the burgeoning Latin American dining scene. In the last 18 months, high-profile restaurants such as Carnivale, Cuatro and Zocalo have opened and brought to Chicago their own riffs on ceviche.

DeLaCosta, the River East restaurant opened in September by Douglas Rodriguez (regarded as the father of Nuevo Latino cuisine and author of the "The Great Ceviche Book"), features a 10-seat ceviche bar where diners watch their dishes prepared on the spot. A best-seller at the restaurant is their "Fire and Ice" ceviche, using tuna and calamari with Thai chile, coconut, kaffir lime and galangal leche (similar to ginger).

"People's perception of ceviche five years ago was boiled shrimp with cocktail sauce, or whitefish marinated overnight in your refrigerator with tons of lemon juice," said Pedro Rangel, sous chef at DeLaCosta. "But now that Latin cooking has taken a step forward, ceviche is making a hard impact."

Chefs and historians agree that ceviche likely evolved from the Inca Empire around the 13th Century (perhaps earlier than that, some argue), in the area that's now Peru. In order to deliver seafood fresh throughout the region's mountainous terrain, fish caught from the Pacific (most often corvina, a white fish in the sea bass family) was filleted and cured with seawater, salt and aji amarillo, a Peruvian hot pepper.

Spanish colonization in the 16th Century introduced citrus fruits to the region. Limes, with their

palatable flavor and high citric acid, became a popular marinade and did a better job keeping seafood from spoiling.

The way ceviche is "cooked" is a lesson in biochemistry. When heat is applied to foods containing protein, the proteins undergo a molecular transformation called denaturation--it's what happens when raw meat is cooked. This same denaturation process occurs when seafood for ceviche is soaked in citrus juice. Soak diced fish in lime juice (or any citric acid) long enough (perhaps overnight) and it becomes "well done." Soak fish for a few minutes and it will get opaque on its exterior, with a sashimi-like quality on its interior.

Ceviche has become a dish on which regions inflect their cultural touches. Traditional Peruvian ceviche is served with potato, corn and yam to cool the palate from chile peppers. Soy sauce and ginger are popular flavoring agents as well because of the immigration of the Chinese and Japanese to Peru in the late 19th Century. In Ecuador, tomato-based ceviches are popular, and cancha (toasted corn nuts) are used for textural contrast. In Honduras, coconut milk is added to the citrus marinade. Within Mexico, tomatoes are prevalent in Acapulco ceviches; in the Yucatan Peninsula, cooks might use habanero or serrano chiles, while in Veracruz, jalapenos are the chile of choice. Ceviche in Mexico is often served with soda crackers in a martini or ice-cream fountain glass. And throughout Central and South America, key limes--smaller and more tart than Persian limes (the type familiar to most Americans)--are the citrus fruit of choice for ceviches.

Regional variations aside, ceviche in its basic form is composed of few ingredients--fresh seafood, citrus juice, herbs, spices and onion--but can produce a prism of flavors and texture. It's both simple and complex, served year round but refreshing enough to remind one of summer.

"When I have that perfect ceviche, it's very ethereal, it's an amazing feeling," said DeLaCosta's Rangel. "Everything just works. It's satisfying, it's filling. A good ceviche should leave you wanting more."

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A creative ceviche sampler

Creative approaches to classic ceviche often vary with the season and availability of ingredients. Here's a 9-restaurant sampler:

Ay Ay Picante Peruvian Cuisine, 4569 N. Elston Ave., 773-427-4239. You'll find three varieties of ceviche here, including a version with tilapia and (ultra spicy!) Peruvian rocoto chiles (\$8.90-\$12.90).

Carnivale, 702 W. Fulton Market, 312-850-5005. The ceviche tasting features five varieties, including a crab ceviche with a butternut squash pico de gallo (\$24).

Cuatro, 2030 S. Wabash Ave., 312-842-8856. Ceviche is offered in two versions--one is vegetarian using hearts of palm, white asparagus and baby bella mushrooms; the other uses salmon and bay scallops (\$6-\$11).

DeLaCosta, 465 E. Illinois St., 312-464-1700. The ceviche trio (\$24) allows you to choose from 10 variations. The bestsellers? Hamachi (in sour orange nectar), fluke (with preserved lemons) and the "Fire and Ice" mix of tuna and calamari with Thai chile and coconut.

La Humita, 3466 N. Pulaski Rd., 773-794-9672. Ceviche camarones is done Ecuadorian-style and features shrimp in a tomato marinade with corn nuts (\$6.50).

Nacional 27, 325 W. Huron St., 312-664-2727. The ceviche sampling platter is available in either small or large sizes (the large serves four; \$11.95-\$23.95). Among the offerings is an ahi tuna and watermelon ceviche in a spicy rice wine vinaigrette.

Taste of Peru, 6545 N. Clark St., 773-381-4540. Three types of Peruvian-style ceviche are available, including an "especial" that features six kinds of seafood (\$12-\$13.75).

Topolobampo/Frontera Grill, 445 N. Clark St., 312-661-1434. Trio, Trio, Trio is a three-ceviche sampler, with the house ceviche of Hawaiian blue marlin among them (\$13.50).

Zocalo, 358 W. Ontario St., 312-302-9977. You'll find five varieties of ceviche on the menu, with the bestseller a combination of tilapia, tomato, roasted red pepper and avocado (\$8-\$9).

--K.P.

kpang@tribune.com

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