



SEAFOOD AT ITS BEST

Contramar and El Caguamo are two places where seafood lovers will not go away disappointed

BY NICHOLAS GILMAN
Special to The News



The humble street stall "El Caguamo" in the Centro is always full.

Mexico City is an aquatic paradise for a seafood lover like me. How can our land-locked capital provide this cornucopia of creatures that swim?

The Mercado de la Viga, our astonishingly huge central fish market, is stocked by truckers who make the 8-hour trek daily from either coast. The gaps are filled by fresh trout and other odd aquatic creatures such as the crayfish-like acamayás from nearby mountain streams.

The myriad ways Mexican cooks work magic with this oceanic bounty is nothing short of amazing. Paella-like rice dishes, spicy soups and stews, lemony cocktails, quesadillas and ceviches are but a few of the mouthwatering treats to be found.

One of my favorite places to eat seafood is the by no means undiscovered Contramar, a chic "be-there-or-be-square" hangout in Colonia Roma. They serve some of the best "pescados y mariscos" (fish and seafood) in town.

Young owners Gabriela Cámara and Pablo Bueno opened their hangar-size space, decorated like a beach "palapa" (palm shelter) in 1998 with a simple vision: "to serve good

food in a comfortable environment." The menu has evolved over the years. Surprisingly, while it has become a fashionable (some might say trendy) venue, the quality of the food has improved.

Simple west-coast fare with an occasional European or Asian touch is offered: tostadas, ceviches, tacos or sashimis. Start with an order of sashimi de atún, a signature dish, the fresh, thinly sliced tuna served on a crispy tostada or a coctel de callo de hacha (scallops).

The classic Spanish pulpos a la Gallega, tender morsels of octopus sautéed with garlic, olive oil and paprika is done to buttery perfection.

Also highly recommended are the soft shell crabs (when in season), sautéed in garlic and butter. Unusual tacos de charal, with tiny dried fish prepared a la mexicana as a rich taco filling, make a great accompaniment to a tequila or beer (it's one of Gabriela's favorites).

But I always go for the

spectacular "pescado a la talla." A whole fish, whatever is freshest at the market, is splayed flat and grilled with 2 salsas - half red, half green. The recipe is Gabriela's variation on a Guerrero classic. It is beautiful to look at, and the light, smoky salsas complement but do not overwhelm the warm juicy fish. You order by the number of diners, and the appropriately sized fish will be served (hence the title "a la talla," to size).

A founding member of the



"Contramar" is a trendy venue in the Colonia Roma.

local Slow Food group, the vivacious Gabriela Cámara puts her money where her mouth is. Contramar quietly serves tortillas handmade from heirloom corn grown in nearby Xochimilco, as well as local, organically grown vegetables.

Recognized by the Mexican government for its achievements, the restaurant was selected to represent the nation's cuisine at Expo Zaragoza in Spain last year.

But there are days when upscale "ambiente cool" just isn't what I'm in the mood for. So I head to the Centro to the humble street stall El Caguamo, which I consider one of the city's best places for seafood. Half of Mexico City seems to agree with me, as it's always packed. (Even Ms. Cámara can occasionally be seen, behind a pair of dark glasses, munching on a tostada here.)

While common wisdom may tell you not to eat fish on the street, the offerings are exquisitely fresh, set on ice and behind glass - and the turnaround is swift. I have interviewed many devoted customers who swear they've never regretted eating here; and neither have I.

The ceviches of jaiba, pescado, calamar or pulpo (crab, fish, squid or octopus), made with chopped tomato, chili, onion and cilantro, augmented with lime juice and olive oil, are out of this world - just the right proportion of sour/herb aroma. They can be eaten as a coctel in a glass or on a tostada.

Be sure to order a caldo de camarón as an accompaniment. This rich, deep ruby-red broth is flavored with both dried and fresh shrimp and chilies; a "chico" (small), served in a cup,

MORE INFO

Try these eateries when you're in the mood for seafood.

CONTRAMAR

Calle Durango 200, near Plaza Cibeles, Colonia Roma

Tel. 5514-3169

Open 1 to 6:30 p.m. Monday to Saturday, 1:30 to 6:30 p.m. Sunday
Reservations, only accepted before 2 p.m., are a must - it is always packed.

EL CAGUAMO

Calle Ayuntamiento, near López, Centro

Open 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., approximately, Monday to Saturday.

usually does it for me.

Filetes, boned fish filets battered and deep fried, should be hot. Make sure to order one if you see them fresh out of the oil.

Also good are the empanadas de camarón, made from freshly rolled dough. I like to request mine "sin mayonesa" as otherwise they will slather mayo on - my only complaint here.

This is a must-stop for aficionados of the real thing...

Don't let the lack of a local waterfront scare you - Mexico City will not fail to satisfy "the seafood lover in you."

Nicholas Gilman is author of the prizewinning guide, Good Food in Mexico City: a Guide to Food Stalls, Fondas and Fine Dining. His Web site is www.mexicocityfood.net.