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5 spot: The essential Javier Plascencia

With Misión 19's 5th anniversary, we pick the influential chef's key restaurants to visit

By Michele Parente



Misión 19 in Tijuana has proved to American diners that Mexican food can be chic and refined.

Last Thursday, Cali-Baja chef Javier Plascencia threw a fifth-anniversary bash for Misión 19, his showcase fine-dining restaurant in Tijuana that put him on the culinary map in both Mexico and the U.S.

Since then, Plascencia has emerged as arguably the cross-border region's brightest star, with a growing empire of restaurants and regular high-profile media appearances. During his recent stint as a guest judge on Bravo's "Top Chef," Plascencia was described by "cheftestant" Chad White as "a Baja bad-ass."

Want to see what all the *bull*, or fuss, is about? Here are five Plascencia places to check out.



Misión 19, which puts an innovative twist on traditional Baja cuisine, is one of several restaurants that Javier Plascencia has opened on both sides of the border.

Style Central: Misión 19

Tucked away in a modern high-rise building outside Tijuana's hubbub, Misión 19 is a game-changer, sparking the city's gastronomic revival and signaling to Americans that, sí, Mexican food can be chic and refined. The signature dish, smoked oyster asada with chicharrón short ribs, ponzu and crispy fideo, underscores Misión's innovative twist on traditional Baja cuisine. So did Plascencia's meticulously executed six-course dinner last week, a bold medley of fiery flavors and supple texture (and even ant larvae). Misión's sexy vibe extends to its upstairs lounge, Bar 20. *Calle Misión de San Javier, second floor, Zona Urbana Río, Tijuana. (52) 664-634-2493 or mision19.com*

DID YOU KNOW?

Misión 19 contracts with a San Diego shuttle bus company to transport groups of up to 10 or 30 people round-trip to the restaurant in Tijuana. See mision19.com/en/shuttle-service.

Wine Country Wood-Fire: Finca Altozano

Like Napa Valley before it, Baja's Valle de Guadalupe has a culinary scene that rivals its wine. Finca Altozano is like an adult campground, with its vineyard-adjacent outdoor dining area enveloped with the scent of the wood-fired oven. Everything emanating from the *asador campestre*, or country grill, tastes earthy, smoky and meant to be eaten with a knockout glass of Valle wine. Don't miss the grilled lamb tacos or wood-fired mushrooms, the single best preparation of the lowly fungus I've ever had. *Carretera Tecate — Ensenada Km 83, Ejido Francisco Zarco, Valle de Guadalupe. (52) 646 156 8045 or fincaaltozano.com*



Javier Plascencia's upscale campground in wine country, Finca Altozano. *Michele Parente / Union-Tribune*

The Classic: Caesar's

Plascencia may be known for his brand of Cali-Baja cooking, but on "Top Chef" he also highlighted perhaps his family's most iconic restaurant, Caesar's, thought to be Tijuana's oldest restaurant. Since the 1920s, when owner Caesar Cardini, an Italian immigrant living in San Diego but working in Mexico, reportedly created the dish on the fly one night, Caesar's has lived off its garlicky fame. Prepared tableside, the salad is just a precursor to a true Old World meal, with such menu staples as fettuccine Alfredo, duck a l'orange, chateaubriand and beef Wellington. *Avenida Revolución 1059, Zona Centro, Tijuana. (52) 664 685 1927 or caesarstijuana.com*

The 'Mex-Med': Romesco

If Caesar's, and the Tuscan-elegant Villa Saverios, are the Plascencia family's Tijuana takes on Italian food sprinkled with some Mexican, Romesco is Baja peppered with some Italian, Spanish, Greek and Middle Eastern seasoning. Javier Plascencia's first foray into San Diego quickly set a new standard for modern "Mediterranean," as he called it. Dishes like Orejas De Mar, marinated abalone-like fish in a chimichurri habanero sauce, coexist comfortably on the menu next to seafood paella and fideuà. And Romesco's bustling bar scene, live music and events have also made it a South Bay hot spot. *4346 Bonita Road, Bonita. (619) 475-8627 or romescomexmed.com*



Chef Javier Plascencia. *handout photo*

Making a Splash: Bracero

There was no bigger restaurant opening in the region last year than Bracero, in vibrant Little Italy. Now that the buzz has died down some, it's easier (and more fun) to get in for the succulent wood-grilled octopus, pristine albacore two ways or soulful crispy brisket and short rib. Plascencia rocks the taco, of course, but the secret weapon here may be dessert. If the luscious brown butter panque is on the menu, order two. As Bracero's name indicates,

the restaurant is an homage to laborers, and in keeping with the theme, its selection of Valle de Guadalupe wines is unrivaled in San Diego. *1490 Kettner Blvd., Little Italy. (619) 756-7864*